ISONZO 1917

Mario Silvestri

Foreword by Mario Isnenghi

FOREWORD

Did one have to be something other than a professional historian to dare - in 1965 - to write about the First World War with such forthrightness of judgement? The works that, from the second half of that decade onwards, would renew its interpretation had not yet been published. The subject was in limbo: the nationalist-Fascist pages were rhetorical and out of action; those linked to the concept of "1915-18", "our war", the "fourth war" of independence, had aged with dignity. And then a major publisher, Einaudi, brought out the more than five hundred pages of Isonzo 1917: maps, an excellent photographic apparatus, and a bibliography. Who was this extraterrestrial, Mario Silvestri, unknown to the profession? He was not the usual journalist, perhaps with a team of ghostwriters, capable of dashing off encyclopaedic prose about everything without respect for specialist fields, intent on showing that journalists know how to write and communicate, while the experts - who can understand them? - are read only by one another. The piles in bookshops, compared with the absence or scarcity of copies by those despised academics, showed that the democracy of readers' choices did not prove the journalists wrong - at least not in terms of numbers.

But the author - born in Verona in 1919 - was not a journalist; he was a colleague (I speak for the others: at the time I had only just graduated, and becoming a professor still lay in the future). He was not, however, a teacher of History in a Faculty of Letters, but a professor of Nuclear Plant Engineering at the Milan Polytechnic and a director of research projects for the exploitation of nuclear energy. He was evidently a "Great-War-ologist", one of the many enthusiasts I would meet over the following half-century - doctors, architects, teachers, pensioners. The Great War generated an extraordinary narrative world around itself: no social group or generation seems excluded from turning to look back at that gigantic and bloody chapter of collective life.

I now ask myself: why was the reception of this book by historians of the Great War so lukewarm and ungenerous? That applies to me as well. I look through the name indexes of my books and find it cited only once, with the cautious word "interesting". Yet it was only at the beginning of a fortunate journey among a broad readership, which made repeated editions possible and, after the move from Einaudi to Rizzoli, brought it to this new BUR edition: in a sense, its consecration and conclusive proof of its communicative virtues.

Those virtues are unquestionable. Silvestri writes well and does not disdain the anecdote, yet he knows how to steer his ship on the open sea. He leads the reader into a European war, not merely an Italian one; he alternates the broad view with analytical detail, History - as the saying goes - with stories. Although he is not a military historian, he is a technician: he moves confidently among military technologies, models, calibres and ranges - of guns, machine guns and rifles - and also through chemistry and the environmental conditions that favoured the new and terrible weapon of gas. His command of these matters is unlike that of historians whose approach is political or cultural; and, compared with military historians in the strict sense, he can also bring into play his attention to, and talent for, compelling narrative. I would almost say for dramatisation.

This scientist with a good pen tends to novelise and theatricalise the situations experienced by the characters crowding the "theatre of war": a swarm of generals, colonels, lieutenants and ordinary soldiers, each with a full name and individually drawn. He almost seems able to see inside them, like the omniscient narrators of nineteenth-century novels. At times - so it seems to me - he overdoes it and becomes excessive. One may accept the amusing sentence, "At Cavaciocchi's headquarters, arrivals and departures had followed one another like a film" (p. 353); but one cannot say - or perhaps it did not seem pertinent at the time -: "The punch thrown on the middle Isonzo had crunched against the Austrian

wall and managed to knock loose only a few flakes of plaster, but it was still a left-hand feint intended to serve as a prologue and accompaniment. The plan now called for a right uppercut, delivered by the Third Army. Its task was to move against the intricate defences of the Karst" (p. 160).

Such "expressive" phrases punctuate the work. They are probably what scandalised some readers and perhaps attracted many others. I would go so far as to say that the book, courageous and pioneering in other respects, was even more so in freeing itself from the conventions of its genre. It was disconcerting then; today, precisely at these points, it may be in tune with the unruly, over-the-top public and private language of our times. It might now be no less successful, and perhaps even more so.

Yet with regard to content, that judgement might perhaps be reversed today. Some of the book's very virtues will now appear to many as defects - not in my eyes, and not in themselves; quite the opposite - but in the eyes of a broad section of today's public, encouraged by the crisis and calling into question of historiographical paradigms.

In 1965, Isonzo 1917's challenge to the motives and purposes of the First World War was stark, a genuine shock to schoolroom commonplaces and the remnants of memory, bringing down an entire axis of values. Today, however, the most uncompromising individualists and anti-statists, and the most doctrinaire believers that war is meaningless and absurd, will find that Silvestri still grants war too much legitimacy. For example: are generals, all of them, now to be regarded as murderers or not? That is the peremptory assumption of the most purist and heavy-handed pacifism. Hence - as some people demand of mayors and street-naming commissions - away, in the name of a clean sweep, with all those avenues, squares and streets named after Cadorna! Our author, by contrast, makes distinctions: this man yes, that man no. Both have their faults, but "Cadorna was not bloodthirsty" (p. 189); he had merits, and Capello had them too, although Caviglia was better. Badoglio, meanwhile, benefited from self-interested protection, but as commander of XXVII Army Corps and the man responsible for the artillery he bears more blame than anyone for what happened - and what failed to happen - at Caporetto, alongside the gas, the enveloping fog and the German plan.

Again, I have already said that the author's cultural and professional background made him sensitive and well equipped where technical data were concerned. Thus he reconstructs the productive capacity of the economic system, the structural factors of the entire machine, the manpower yielded by the conscription classes, and the composition and performance of the large formations - divisions and brigades - and of the units - regiments and battalions - of which they consisted. What conclusion does he draw? That the Italian army began rich in men and poor in armaments, but managed to make up the deficit as it went along.

Silvestri makes little effort to conceal that he feels closer than to other positions to Giolitti's neutralism and to the pragmatic reasons behind his advice against entering the war. Yet he then records that Italy, in the end, held out and managed - even while continuing to think badly of the political class as a whole, government and opposition alike, forgiving it little or nothing with a biting pen fond of irony. Certainly, we always outnumbered the Austrians - a fact that is by no means widely known, since rhetoric has told the story differently - and despite this no breakthrough was achieved and neither Ljubljana nor Vienna was reached. Yet in the various battles Italy sometimes lost, sometimes drew, and in the end won the war, although Vittorio Veneto came later and lies outside the frame of this volume. It is not that Silvestri fails to see the profiteers, the well-connected, the rhetoricians and the incompetents, in the country and at the front. Nevertheless, his overall interpretation avoids the customary self-flagellating preconception of an Italy always and in every circumstance inferior and ragged; and this applies to his interpretation of Caporetto as well. Without polemical claims, but as a factual observation too often omitted, he recalls that in General Nivelle's army in France, between April and June 1917, no fewer than sixteen army

corps were affected by mutinies, followed by executions; and that between July and August even the supposedly supremely disciplined German fleet had thousands of sailors in revolt. By the third or fourth year of war, exhaustion was spreading through every army. An interpretation of the October crisis as a national redde rationem and the outcome of an entire historical failure - of the people, the nation and the state - therefore seemed misplaced to him. The Russian Revolution stirred dreams not only among Italian proletarians, military and civilian; and Benedict XV's phrase "useless slaughter" rang out, consoling and encouraging, at least in Catholic countries.

Serious errors of command, combined with a general climate of exhaustion; but not a planned cry of "Everyone go home!", still less a revolution or Russia transplanted to Italy. Such is Silvestri's view. If, in closing, I again ask myself why - after reading the text immediately and annotating it extensively - I mentally filed it away, I must confess that the reason was not only his stylistic affectations and liberties, or his technically improper citations, but a different angle of approach. The body of cases drawn from memoir literature was, after all, the same material I was questioning: Salsa, Frescura, Arturo Stanghellini, Mario Muccini. I had only just "discovered" them in my 1962 thesis, before turning that thesis into the books that would follow. Yet we read them with very different expectations. For my part, I was inclined to understand and value the supposed radical impulses which - before the resistance on the Piave - Cadorna, Mussolini, Bissolati and others instead charged as the abominable guilt of the men defeated at Caporetto.

MARIO ISNENGHI

INTRODUCTION

I am not a historian, and I did not intend to write a work of history, but more modestly a book of evocation. The sources used in this volume are therefore all accessible, and anyone can, with some effort, trace them in libraries or on the book market. Of the available sources, moreover, I used only a portion, since within the brief span of five thousand working hours I could not have compared and interwoven all the often conflicting versions given for many circumstances and episodes in publications devoted, over the past fifty years, to the First World War, to Italy's part in it, and to that portion of Italy's part concerning the spring, summer and autumn of 1917.

I must add that this is an account written from a strictly Italian point of view, using overwhelmingly Italian material, while the foreign sources - particularly Austrian and German ones - are, with few exceptions, borrowed or second-hand. For readers curious about statistics, I will say that, in addition to numerous contemporary periodicals, daily or monthly, I drew useful information from about five hundred books dealing to varying degrees with the events from May to October 1917.

What interest can events apparently so remote hold for an Italian today? What interest can be concentrated in so short a period - six months - and in so limited an area, the banks of the Isonzo from Plezzo to the mouths of the Timavo? The six months described are certainly only a brief slice of history, but they were also a moment of decisive importance, at least for the world of today, even though perhaps that will no longer be true a century from now. It is enough to recall that during those months a revolutionary process gathered strength in Russia which, according to Soviet leaders, is still under way. It is enough to recall that the entry of the United States of America into the war on the side of the Entente marked the first assertion of a great country which thereafter participated to an ever greater degree - until becoming predominant today - in maintaining the balance of power in the world. Without the United States, it is difficult to believe that the bled-white and humiliated nations of the old continent, torn apart twenty years later by a second fratricidal war, would be capable by themselves of representing the fundamental values of Western civilisation. For us, those months and weeks of 1917 represent the last page of history written by the old Italy that emerged from the Risorgimento.

I did my best to make the account objective, relegating my personal commentary to an appendix, and for that reason I scattered it with numerous quotations. When reproducing passages by others, it is easy to make the quoted author say anything or the opposite of anything. I nevertheless assure the reader that I did not select quotations with the tweezers of partisan bias or of a preconceived opinion - which, in any case, I did not possess - but according to a criterion that was necessarily subjective, yet inspired by honest intent: to bring back to life the passions and feelings that moved the protagonists. Let this explain the many contradictions the reader may seem to encounter. Was Cadorna a good commander or a bad one? What was General Capello's personality? What responsibilities did Badoglio and Cavaciocchi bear for the rout at Caporetto? What was the soldiers' state of mind? Were they capable at the same time of heroism and cowardice? The facts are what they are, and within certain limits they can answer such impertinent questions. Beyond that, an absolute judgement that deliberately dispenses with circumstantial evidence and carefully avoids working hypotheses is still prevented by lack of information; in any event, it would remain subject to the discretion of the judge.

Immediately after the end of the First World War, the events narrated here - whose memory and associated sufferings were still extremely fresh - became the subject of fierce controversy. A vast literature of memoirs and essays, with a distinctly passionate undertone, arose and forced itself upon public attention. Its authors ranged from obscure junior reserve officers to generals who had held positions of the highest responsibility. Official publications and brief newspaper articles fed the debate.

Inveterate men of letters took up the pen again as soon as they had put down their uniforms, while new men entered it whose previously unknown literary qualities had been stirred and sharpened by what they had experienced.

It was a lively gust, but necessarily a short one: the advent of Fascism dampened this immediate literary fervour. It could hardly have been otherwise, since controversy over the war and the responsibilities connected with it was ill suited to a regime that admitted only one explanation of every event - the official one. Thus, around 1926, the general public was removed from the field of debate, but the restricted circle of specialists did not suffer the same fate. Indeed, it may be said that the critical analysis of the operations conducted by the Italian army against Austria only then began, continuing until the opening of the Second World War. The discussion included figures beyond the reach of the tyranny: Marshals of Italy, generals and professional historians whose eminence or obscurity granted them the luxury of heterodox, or simply independent, opinions. This second type of discussion naturally had a more hermetic character: it was a conversation among initiates. At the same time, the general public was served a different kind of literature, whose principal merit consisted in subordinating the events of the past to the needs of the present, with all the distortions entailed by such an instrumental use of history.

The Second World War stifled these controversies at what we might call the higher level. Italy was gorging itself on history, though in an even more passive role than in 1915, in such quantities that an immense new field of investigation and reflection was offered to its children. But towards the middle of the 1950s, interest in the events of the First World War slowly but steadily reasserted itself. Partly a cause, but also a consequence, was a new wave of memoirs and recollections by protagonists who had waited until the end of their lives - or even until they had entered the grave - before speaking: Orlando, Cadorna, Gatti, Malagodi, Caviglia and De Lollis. Some had already spoken thirty years earlier; others spoke for the first time. Meanwhile, the Army General Staff continued, with exasperating slowness, to publish volume after volume. The latest, issued in 1953, describe precisely the military operations from June to September 1917. One must praise their immense documentation, including photographs, and the minuteness with which military actions are described; yet one wishes that, after abandoning their irritatingly apologetic tone, they had devoted some space to other neglected details - for example, convictions and executions for military offences, mutinies and removals from command. Describing them would beyond doubt reduce certain phenomena to their proper proportions, whereas an attempt to keep them silent only inflames curiosity.

As I was saying, stimulated by this second wave of publications, a revival of interest arose - and still persists, with every appearance of lasting - in the events in which Italy took part during the First World War. This kind of interest reconnects with the learned school already mentioned, which between 1930 and 1940 undertook a critical reassessment of Italy's war. It remains, however, a literature for specialists, although the changed and, one hopes, improved state of Italian literacy suggests that this kind of writing may become accessible to a large body of enthusiasts.

For similar reasons, but to a much greater extent, the same phenomenon developed abroad among the former allies and former enemies of the two world wars. In France, Britain, Germany and the United States, alongside this kind of "learned" literature, another kind was born - or rather reborn - with more popular aims. It drew directly on the spirit of "trench" literature and sought to preserve its aggressive and dramatic character. One of the most recent and striking examples is Barbara Tuchman's The Guns of August, published in 1963. But this is not an isolated case. The English-speaking nations in particular are flooded with books, each pursuing aims different from those of a historical work and lacking its rigour, sometimes with no greater - and rather inferior - ambition than to be easily read. Among many examples [1], I recall Alan Moorhead's Gallipoli (1956); Donald Macintyre's Jutland (1957); Leon

Wolff's In Flanders Fields (1958); Alan Clark's The Donkeys (1961); Barrie Pitt's 1918: The Last Act (1962); Richard Watt's Dare Call It Treason (1963); and Laurence Stallings's The Doughboys (1963). Their function is to make important aspects of contemporary life, culture and history accessible and appealing to a broad public.

This account aspires to belong to the same category. Readers wishing to know the sources used and the locations of the quotations will find them in the appendix. I confirm, however, that it was not written with the detachment, and perhaps the seriousness, of the historian - which I am not - but almost with the passion of someone who took part in the events - which I did not, because I had not yet been born. I will say more: that passion grew as the narrative advanced, until I seemed to experience the predominant feelings of the time. Above all of them stands boundless compassion, boundless respect and boundless admiration for the Italian officers and soldiers who faced unspeakable trials with indomitable courage.

They were ordinary men, from every background; many were mediocre, some above average, and the great majority simply human beings, nothing more. Whether they were moved by a sense of duty, faith in ideals that may even have been mistaken or, more simply, fear of punishment and reprisals, for each of them there came a moment when he was not afraid.

This book is dedicated to the combatants of the First World War: to the seven hundred thousand dead and to the one and a half million wounded, maimed and disabled.

MARIO SILVESTRI

Technical Note

In 1917 the Italian army was organised as follows:

an infantry rifle company had a nominal strength of 200 men, including five officers, and included a machine-pistol section equipped with two weapons;

an infantry battalion consisted of three rifle companies, a *lanciatorpedini* (light mortar) section and a machine-gun company (with six heavy machine guns);

three battalions formed a regiment;

two regiments, together with two or more brigade machine-gun companies, formed an infantry brigade;

an infantry division consisted of two brigades, several divisional machine-gun companies (from two to six), a field or mountain artillery regiment (about 48 guns), an engineer battalion and various services.

A Bersaglieri brigade had a composition similar to that of an infantry brigade. Some Bersaglieri battalions, usually attached to the cavalry, were equipped with bicycles. A formation of three or more Alpini battalions was called a group (and corresponded to a regiment). Two or more groups formed a grouping (corresponding to an infantry brigade).

Two or more divisions constituted an army corps, which also had its own artillery, of larger calibre than the divisional artillery. An army corps also included small contingents of mounted cavalry - what little remained in 1917 - and engineer, medical, supply, military-justice and other troops.

An army consisted of several army corps, army-artillery batteries of the largest calibres, and auxiliary troops. It was assigned aeroplane squadrons and balloon sections. Anti-aircraft batteries, most of them motorised, were also generally assigned to Army Commands.

All the armies together constituted the mobilised army. In the middle of 1917 the following armies were in operation: First, Second, Third, Fourth and Sixth. XII Corps (in Carnia), XVI Corps (in Albania) and the 35th Division (in Macedonia) were independent.

The designations universally adopted, and followed in the text, were as follows:

An Arabic ordinal number indicated an infantry or Bersaglieri regiment (37th, 114th, and so on). The two numbering sequences were independent and approximately progressive. The designation II/205th is read as: 2nd Battalion, 205th Infantry Regiment.

An Alpini battalion had a name (for example, Val Chisone or Aosta). An Alpini group was indicated by a Roman numeral.

Infantry brigades had names (Pisa, Bologna, and so on); Bersaglieri brigades and Alpini groupings were indicated by Roman numerals.

Divisions were usually indicated by Arabic ordinal numbers, while army corps and armies were indicated by Roman numerals.

In addition to its six regular battalions - exceptionally nine - an infantry brigade had a replacement battalion, which kept the regular battalions at full strength. The replacement battalion in turn drew men from Army replacement battalions, themselves supplied by the military districts.

In the Italian text, the word fronte ("front") is used both in the feminine and in the masculine, as contemporary usage fluctuated between the two forms. Adjectives denoting branches or specialities and substantivised terms (alpini, and so on) always begin with a lower-case letter. Capitals are used in designations such as IV Army Corps and Second Army, but not in such phrases as an army corps or the two armies.

The military ranks of writers quoted in the text are those they held at the time, not those they attained later: thus General Caviglia, General Giardino, Lieutenant Soffici, and so on.

As for place names, especially those with double forms (Italian and Slavic) or triple forms (Italian, Slavic and German), I have made no attempt to standardise their spelling. In each instance I have used the most common and generally accepted form. In quotations, however, the form used by the quoted writer has been retained whenever it does not create ambiguity.

With regard to the tracing of battle lines on the maps, it should be borne in mind that it does not faithfully follow the actual contours of the ground, which are generally very broken, but averages out - so to speak - its irregularities.

"I challenge any patriot to come and spend,
as an ordinary soldier, just a thousand nights
in the front line without coming to hate his country."

(From a conversation between two French soldiers,
one day in the spring of 1917.)

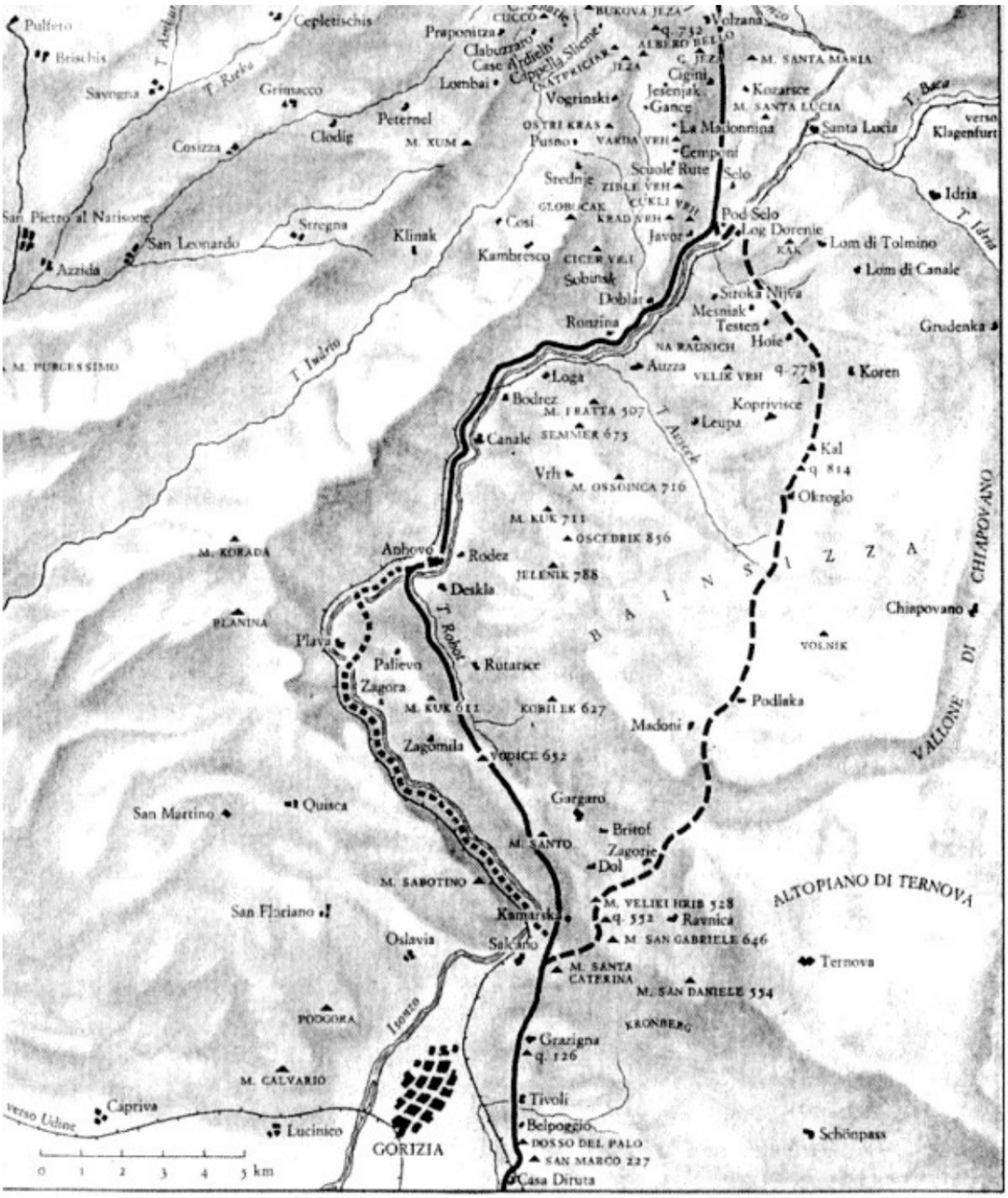
1. Fronti di combattimento in Europa e nel Vicino Oriente all'inizio del 1917. (Nel riquadro in alto a destra la zona tratteggiata indica il territorio volontariamente abbandonato dai Tedeschi sul fronte occidentale nel marzo 1917).

1. Battle fronts in Europe and the Near East at the beginning of 1917. (In the inset at upper right, the shaded area indicates the territory voluntarily abandoned by the Germans on the Western Front in March 1917.)

2. The Italian front at the same time.

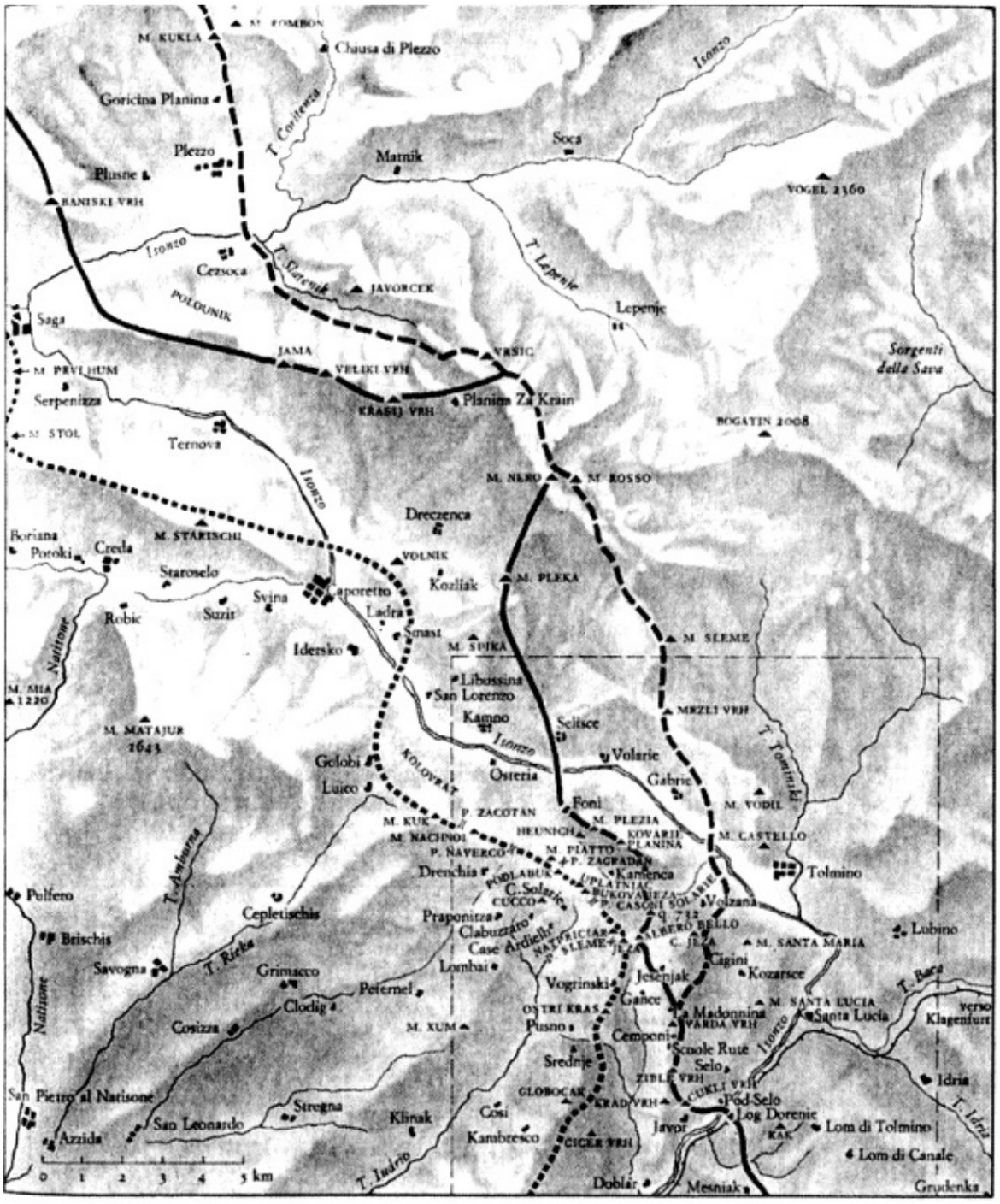
3. Basso Isonzo. (La linea punteggiata indica la posizione dello schieramento italiano il 12 maggio 1917, quella continua le posizioni italiane il 19 agosto 1917, quella tratteggiata le posizioni italiane il 31 agosto 1917).

3. Lower Isonzo. (The dotted line indicates the Italian deployment on 12 May 1917; the solid line, the Italian positions on 19 August 1917; and the dashed line, the Italian positions on 31 August 1917.)



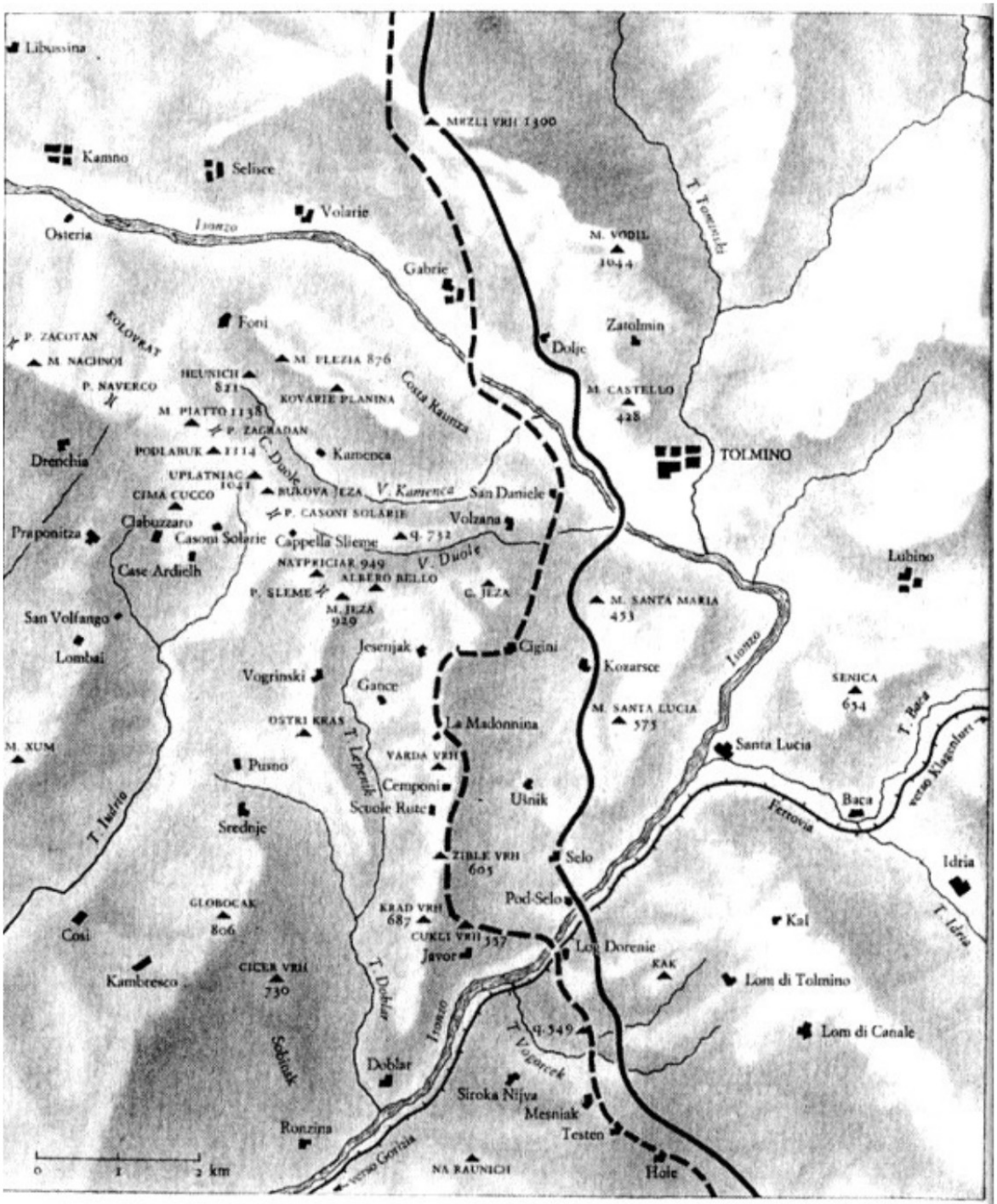
4. Medio Isonzo. (La linea punteggiata indica la posizione dello schieramento italiano il 12 maggio 1917, quella continua le posizioni italiane il 19 agosto 1917, quella tratteggiata le posizioni italiane a metà settembre 1917).

4. Middle Isonzo. (The dotted line indicates the Italian deployment on 12 May 1917; the solid line, the Italian positions on 19 August 1917; and the dashed line, the Italian positions in mid-September 1917.)



5. Alto Isonzo. (La linea tratteggiata indica lo schieramento di difesa avanzata, quella continua lo schieramento di difesa ad oltranza, quella punteggiata lo schieramento d'armata).

5. Upper Isonzo. (The dashed line indicates the forward defensive deployment; the solid line, the defence-in-depth deployment; and the dotted line, the Army deployment.)



La testa di ponte di Tolmino il 23 ottobre 1917. (La linea tratteggiata indica lo schieramento della prima linea italiana, quella continua lo schieramento della prima linea austriaca).

The Tolmino bridgehead on 23 October 1917. (The dashed line indicates the Italian front-line deployment; the solid line, the Austrian front-line deployment.)

CHAPTER ONE

Italy's national unification was completed on 20 September 1870 with the capture of Rome, which became in fact, as it had previously been proclaimed in law, the capital of Italy.

One historical cycle, lasting more than fifty years, had ended and another was beginning. "The heroic age is over," the deluded thought, "and from now on life will be easy and dull." But, as has always happened, governing a country well proved more difficult than creating it. Political union marked the beginning of Italy's economic division; and the disparities between North and South, which were said to have been fostered by long centuries of separation, grew more pronounced instead of disappearing.

After more than a thousand years, Italy officially spoke with one voice among the assembly of great nations, which had been accustomed for centuries to conducting a unified policy. Although Prussia, expanded to the dimensions of the first great German Reich, pointed to domestic consolidation and the development of industry and trade as the road to progress, Italy, afflicted by the complex of the "helmet of Scipio", rediscovered the vocation - never wholly dormant even in the dark centuries - to civilise other, more savage peoples and to bring them the prosperity it did not possess at home. Italy was therefore more strongly captivated by the example of the two great world powers, France and Britain, which a centuries-old tradition still drove along the path of great conquests.

The beginning of Italian penetration into Africa coincided with a period of great poverty at home. The last decades of the nineteenth century were marked by complete economic and social stagnation and by a continuous deterioration in living standards. With the opening of the twentieth century, a modest prosperity finally began, allowing the Libyan campaign to be undertaken without excessive disruption.

The World War, preceded by numerous crises that had brought Europe, and with it the world, to the brink of catastrophe, broke out almost by chance - though for reasons that were certainly not accidental - and suddenly engulfed most of the civilised nations. Within a few days, ambassadors transformed into messengers delivered some twenty declarations of war.

It all began with the assassination at Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, by a group of Slavic fanatics whose base of operations lay within the small but ambitious Kingdom of Serbia. Almost a month nevertheless passed before the irreparable occurred: the loveliest month of the year, when schools have just closed, families are thinking about their summer holidays and office workers are savouring the prospect of leave. The drowsy atmosphere was shattered by the ultimatum Austria sent Serbia on 23 July, demanding a more or less unconditional surrender. Hatreds dormant for decades, repressed ambitions, failed manoeuvres and latent rivalries all converged in an inextricable Gordian knot, which the Central Powers thought they could simply cut with a sword stroke, confident that they would get away with it as they had on other occasions. Unfortunately, events took a different course. On one side stood Germany and Austria-Hungary, later joined by Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire; on the other, France, the British Empire, Russia, Serbia and Belgium, later joined by Japan, Italy, the United States and a host of other, less important nations.

Fortunately for Italy, which was bound to the Central Powers by the Triple Alliance, the conflict had broken out in such a way that Germany and Austria-Hungary displayed considerable effrontery in asking for Italy's automatic intervention on their side. To some of our own hotheads, however, this was a misfortune. How splendid it would have been if the storm that had swept away the others had suddenly swept us away as well, no matter on which side. There would then have been no time for second thoughts; and reflection, as everyone knows, encourages prudence and caution.

In reality, after centuries of events in which Italy's role had generally been passive, the opportunity had finally arrived to determine its own destiny without encumbrance. The nation's interest had been entrusted to common sense.

But the complex of the "helmet of Scipio", far from subsiding, awakened completely. What was this conspiracy of cowardice, hypocrisy and comfortable peaceableness, this talk of wages and profits, roads and pensions, while others were killing one another in a tremendous and terrifying slaughter - something to be desired with a passionately manly heart? Here at last was a fine war, in which to avenge every defeat and humiliation of the past, from Adwa, Custoza and Lissa all the way back to Frederick Barbarossa, Alaric and Brennus. As for Giolitti, the tiresome man who prattled that the fate of thirty-five million Italians should not be risked even for half a million unredeemed Italians, and that in any case exchanging half a million living people for half a million dead ones was no bargain, he had better watch his own skin if he valued it.

These ideas, spread by the most extreme nationalism, were not shared by the men responsible for public affairs, who were fairly elderly and averse to adventure. At their level the argument became better reasoned, but led to the same conclusions. The Salandra government, which had come to power in March 1914 and had immediately become embroiled in troublesome domestic affairs - street clashes and strikes culminating in "Red Week" - obtained a welcome respite when the war broke out and was able to concentrate on grand policy.

The questions confronting these respectable gentlemen were the following:

a) who would win;

b) how long the war would last;

c) which side would offer more if Italy decided to join it;

d) how much Italy's intervention would hasten the end of the war;

e) what would happen to Italy if it remained neutral.

Unfortunately, they already had several answers ready even before formulating the corresponding questions. The answer to the last seemed obvious: Italy would be erased from the ranks of the great powers and would incur the contempt and anger of the victor. It never remotely occurred to them that the victor might emerge so exhausted and battered as to have other concerns. The first, second and fourth questions were linked: whichever side Italy joined would win - Italy was a great power, and did not Italy have its lucky star? - and the duration of the war would therefore be decisively shortened by Italy's entry. The crucial question was accordingly contained in the third point; but once it was reached, although the proceeding was hardly noble, it was necessary to bargain while armed with "sacred egoism".

Negotiations then began on two fronts, and their outcome could hardly be in doubt. The Western Allies could easily be generous: Trento, Trieste, the Brenner frontier, Dalmatia and slices of Turkey. The Central Powers, which would have had to surrender pieces of their own capital, were naturally much more miserly: Trento, agreed; a few adjustments to the eastern frontier, perhaps - but what the devil would you do with Trieste? Trieste is the pearl of the Empire; and you, with so many Adriatic ports, would lock it in a safe and make its splendour vanish. In compensation, Austria was vaguely generous with its opponents' colonial territories.

Thus came the Treaty of London, by which on 26 April 1915 the Italian government secretly undertook to enter the war against Austria and its allies within one month. On 3 May the Triple Alliance was repudiated and mobilisation was set in motion - partly by chance, because Salandra, in order to preserve secrecy more effectively, had not informed the Chief of the General Staff. Sensing on his own initiative

that events were coming to a head, the latter obtained confirmation of dates and facts from the Prime Minister. But the country, and most of its representatives, also declared themselves against the war.

The Salandra Cabinet resigned, and only because the King rejected its resignation, and because many Giolittian deputies prudently changed their minds at the last moment, was the war saved. Great demonstrations took place throughout Italy; students were invited to leave their classrooms and supplied with little tricolour flags with which to acclaim the historic decision. Mobilisation, which had almost collapsed with grave consequences after Salandra's resignation, resumed its course and the army was moved closer to the operational zone. On 24 May war was declared on Austria, but not on Germany, with which Salandra hoped not to spoil relations entirely.

The widespread belief that the Italian army, untested in battle and representing only five per cent of the forces in the field, would prove decisive to the general victory cannot be explained by logical reasons, but only by psychological ones. The war that began on 24 May 1915 did not last three months, as the Prime Minister and the optimists believed - he dreamed of calling new elections at an early date and presenting himself as the President of Victory. Nor did it last six months, as the usual pessimists who had favoured neutrality predicted. After twenty months, the swollen and bled-white Italian army was deployed more or less on its starting positions, and its losses had passed the first figure with six zeros. The Salandra Cabinet, meanwhile, had expired and was replaced in June 1916 by a "national ministry" headed by the eighty-year-old Paolo Boselli. On 27 August of the same year, Italy also declared war on Germany.

For these reasons, so much Italian youth was bivouacked along the Isonzo at the opening of 1917.

It was early morning on a cool, rainy spring day. The lieutenant sat up on his camp bed and stretched. Then he leaned through the opening connecting his shelter with the trench. One leap and he was in the communication trench. Every time he was surprised to discover that, had he made a slightly more athletic jump, he would have smashed his face against its wall of Karst stone and sandbags. He began his inspection. The machine-gunner was caressing the large cylinder that enclosed the barrel of his weapon.

- Nothing to report, Lieutenant, sir.

He moved on. A soldier had laid his rifle along the parapet and was fastening a shoe.

- Locascio, why aren't you at your sentry post?
- I'm goin' straight back, Lieutenant, sir.
- How did it go?
- Drenched I got, Lieutenant, sir.
- So did all of us. Get back to your post.

Another soldier advanced by squeezing along the backs of the men in position.

- The captain is coming.

The lieutenant hurried in the indicated direction. They could barely stand side by side.

- Everything seems quiet.
- It has been for some time, Captain, sir.

The captain cautiously peered over the edge of the barricade, beyond which stretched hills that appeared deserted. Farther back stood another, Hermada, equally deserted. Or so it seemed. A small group of soldiers sat talking on the floor of the trench. They spoke of the camorra, suspended leave and the relief

that had failed to arrive. The captain looked at them benevolently and tried to encourage them, making them brothers in his republican sentiments, for he came from Cesena.

- A little patience and the relief will come, sons of Mazzini.
- And grandsons of Garibaldi, soldier Locascio muttered.

The captain stared at him until he lowered his eyes, but added no reprimand.

- By the way, Lieutenant, divisional headquarters has asked for a non-commissioned officer to serve as an observer in an aeroplane and reconnoitre the Austrian positions in front of our lines. Whom can we send?
- I'd like to go myself, said Sergeant Ceccon.
- Agreed, said the lieutenant.
- But I want an aeroplane with a hole in it.
- What do you want the hole for?
- I've always fancied shitting in the Germans' faces.
- If that makes you happy.

The sergeant bent down to pick up his haversack. At that moment a distant rifle shot echoed. His helmet toppled from his head. Then his whole body pivoted on one knee and turned over. His eyes remained wide open and motionless. A spent bullet, fired from who knew where, had entered the back of his head and penetrated his brain.

A stupid death, but a complete one. That was how men died on the Karst on a quiet day in 1917.

- The attack is set for seven tomorrow morning.

After weeks of relative quiet, the soldiers could scarcely believe it. But it was neither a mystery nor a secret. The captain had told the lieutenant in a voice that was not particularly low; the lieutenant would have to repeat it to the squad leaders, and they in turn to the troops.

At headquarters, the brigadier had been perfectly clear and almost threatening with the colonel:

- Your regiment will attack after a two-hour artillery preparation. The fire is to begin at five. Although this is a diversionary attack, Point 218 must be taken. I will hold you responsible if the usual confusion occurs. And no patrols tonight: if they capture any prisoners from us, there goes the surprise.

Along the firing line, the soldiers assigned to the "diversionary" attack lived through those hours which, though they never pass, pass far too quickly. The platoon commander, tense and sleepless, smoked a cigarette in silence. His predecessor had been sent to the rear to give propaganda speeches, but with one leg missing. They had called him lucky and joked that he was going to hide in a safe billet - so cruel is human pity. Fine propaganda, delivered by a mutilated man. Better death than the ruin of one's own body.

A figure approached silently through the night: he recognised the sergeant-major, the veteran. The platoon had already gone into the assault four times, and the sergeant-major was the sole survivor of the first wave, the one at Oslavia.

- Tomorrow will be worse than last time.
- Why so pessimistic?

- You weren't here three months ago, Lieutenant, sir. Since then they've thickened the wire, reinforced the machine-gun positions and increased the number of trench mortars. Let us hope the wind blows the right way tomorrow morning, or we'll get the gas as well.
- Going into the assault in masks would be the worst possible disaster. Better not to think about it.

As the stars grew pale, the trench awoke. Only a few minutes remained, and the pack train, which had just arrived, hurriedly unloaded the hot meal, eager to leave again as quickly as possible. With the meal came ten litres of grappa as a substitute for courage: ten litres for fifty men. But some loved life more than the drug:

- I won't touch that stuff. It cuts your legs from under you and makes you lose your bearings.
- Who gives a damn about legs and bearings? With or without them, we'll reach hell just the same.

Another man had a more cunning plan:

- I'll drink, but I mean to save my hide all the same. I'll take one good leap forward and one back. Then a shot in the foot with my '91, right through the bone.

But the sergeant-major had heard him:

- One more word and you'll end up before the firing squad.

With a deep roar, the artillery began its work precisely on time. Tall fountains of earth and smoke spurted from the battered enemy trenches. The sight encouraged the soldiers, especially the "new men", who could not believe anyone could survive beneath that rain; the "old hands", though they had serious doubts, said nothing.

Then, as the fire lengthened towards the second lines and the reverse slope of the height, the trench mortars began vomiting out their canisters loaded with powerful explosive. Wire entanglements, trenches and communication trenches were now all hidden by an enormous cloud of dust.

At last, as if by magic, silence. At the order, bayonets were fixed. A few seconds, and then a shout:

- Savoy!

Everyone out, with the second lieutenant at their head, to reach the enemy trenches before the surviving defenders had time to set up their automatic weapons. Two hundred metres of open ground, uphill: two hundred seconds of running, and a hundred had already passed. No! Eighty. No! Sixty, fifty...

The crossfire of dozens of machine guns began simultaneously, mowing down the first line and catching the men running to their deaths in the most grotesque postures. The survivors threw themselves to the ground, stunned and beaten back by the explosions of trench-mortar bombs. Once again the Austrians had gained the decisive minute. At the first lull in the machine-gun fire, the forward rush was repeated and proved far more dangerous.

Within half an hour it was all over. The last to fall was the second lieutenant. Staggering and spilling blood and intestines from a hideous gash in his abdomen, he dropped to his knees before the enemy trench, facing a machine-gunner. The machine-gunner was Hungarian and Catholic, and he disliked giving the coup de grace to another dying Catholic, even if the man was an Italian pig. Thus the second lieutenant was given five more seconds of life. His final thought was that he still had two examinations to take before graduating and would have to postpone them for who knew how long... Then he died; and with him died the first platoon of the first company of the third battalion of the regiment. The survivors never again had the chance to return to the line, for they had by then been reduced to a band of mutilated and disfigured men.

This happened in 1917, on a hot summer day.

On the floor of the Isonzo valley at Plezzo, life was not hard; it was simply foul. Wherever one dug, one found water draining down from the surrounding mountains, from Rombon, the fortress of the Alpini, and from Monte Nero, dark and sinister as its name. When it rained, as it did in those days of late autumn, legs sank to the knee and sometimes to the hip. The air was damp and icy, but remained just far enough above zero to prevent the moisture from freezing, allowing it instead to penetrate and seep through the cloth to skin corroded and macerated by the liquid filth. Bayonet fighting was not frequent on the valley floor: men died of arthritis, rheumatism and, above all, pleurisy and tuberculosis.

Nevertheless, many soldiers considered themselves fortunate to be holding that quiet and unhealthy sector rather than the healthier and bloodier Gorizia amphitheatre. At Army headquarters, a General Staff officer had coined the name "the Health Front" for the area after observing it at length through a high-powered telescope.

For several days, however, ominous rumours had been circulating: a great enemy attack, it was said, was imminent. Would the Health Front then belie its unhealthy reputation?

From the Austrian lines, about fifty metres higher and half a kilometre from ours, our industrious infantrymen could be seen with pumps and buckets. After a day's work, they could lower the water level by a few centimetres.

A month earlier, those same infantrymen had been surveyed by the critical and detached gaze of the finest tactician in the Imperial and Royal Army, Lieutenant Field Marshal Alfred Krauss. Perhaps on that very occasion the senior officer, who as commander of I Army Corps had the task of piercing the lines at that point, had shrewdly realised that the best way to blow apart the defensive cordon was to wash the area thoroughly with a concentrated wave of asphyxiating gas. In any event, among the thousands of trains that during the previous month had poured troops and matériel onto that wild front, one had been loaded with phosgene cylinders.

Two thousand cylinders: two for every Italian soldier defending the floor of the Isonzo valley at Plezzo.

At battalion headquarters the instructions on inspecting and using gas masks had been repeated. Mysterious packages had also been unloaded from the laden mules; they bore English writing and contained strange pairs of rubber underpants.

- What are these for? To keep our balls dry?
- Well done! You've guessed it. To keep them dry from mustard gas.

On the other side, the cylinders marked with the blue cross had been unloaded with every precaution and mounted in pairs on suitable stands at the lip of the trench: each had a treacherous nozzle no more than an inch wide. There were specialists for this work, the German chemical battalion attached to the Jäger Division.

Night, fog, frost and silence dominated the valley when a red rocket rose from the Austrian lines and, with chronometric punctuality, exactly as the High Commands had planned, the Austro-German artillery opened fire. The roar of the guns was soon mingled with the bursting of shells. But not on the "Health Front", where the big shells sank into the mud and for the most part failed to explode.

During a pause in the fire, some infantryman may have heard a prolonged hiss carried by the wind, which blew weakly towards our lines, and been puzzled, since it was unlikely that in those circumstances the enemy would be snoring so collectively. Had he been able to pierce the fog, he would certainly not have been reassured: round helmets pulled low over their foreheads, rubber faces and mica eye-pieces, the German soldiers opening the phosgene cylinders one by one resembled the ghost of death repeated infinitely between two parallel mirrors.

The sentry strained his eyelids in vain to overcome the darkness; he could still see nothing. He rested his rifle for a moment on the parapet and drew breath. It was as though a thousand needles had pierced his lungs: each needle opened a small cavity in the lung tissue, an immediate oedema covering the active surface and separating him from life. He tried to move, but could not, and fell as if struck by lightning against the side of the trench.

Chemical death spread like the wind's slap across a field of wheat. Someone found the strength to run to the bell and sound the alarm:

- Gas alarm!

The masks were hastily pulled from their cases.

- Christ, this one's broken!
- Mine has no filter.
- Idiot, you should have checked it before.

But the exchange was interrupted by death, which arrived at battalion headquarters, entered without asking permission and struck down the men at the telephone switchboard and the commander. The telephone, whose lungs were considerably stronger, survived the outrage and continued to ring.

At brigade headquarters they swore, without thereby inducing a hand at the other end to lift the receiver. It was decided to send an officer to the front lines. He returned shortly afterwards:

- Everything is in order. The soldiers are side by side in position, masks over their faces and rifles in their hands.

He had not troubled to approach closely enough to shake any of them. He would have discovered that they were already lifeless statues.

It was four o'clock in the morning on 24 October 1917.

CHAPTER TWO

How the Country Lived

Dawn rises on 1 January 1917

A ring of fire encircles the Central Powers, and the siege continues across the seas, where the British fleet, assisted by the allied fleets, keeps vigilant watch. Along the western fronts an immense array of men and matériel - more than six million British, French and Italian soldiers - bleeds itself white and bleeds Germany and Austria-Hungary in a new and cruel form of combat: the war of attrition. Other Entente armies in the Balkans, Palestine and Mesopotamia close the ring and link up with Russia. From the beginning of hostilities German trade has been swept from the seas, and the blockade has begun the slow strangulation of Germany and her allies. Every attempt to break the siege has proved impossible: impossible to force the English Channel; impossible to open the northern route, watched by the Home Fleet from its remote anchorage at Scapa Flow; impossible to emerge from the Strait of Otranto into the Mediterranean. Germany is left with the hope of breaking through towards the East, where Russia is tottering under the weight of an internal crisis which the prolongation of the war continues to worsen. And there remains the hope - later proved false - of cutting the enemy's principal supply lines through the unrestricted use of the new submarine weapon.

At the beginning of 1917, therefore, Germany has no possibility of victory, but only of a compromise peace negotiated from an apparent position of strength. The Entente, by contrast, can win provided that all its members hold out; and Russia's defection will be more than compensated for by the intervention of the United States of America.

This concise overall picture represents a historical view, but one unknown to those who lived through those tragic events day by day. Behind them stretches a long line of crosses; ahead lies a livid and impenetrable fog. They are witnesses and actors in a war into which Europe has been sinking for two and a half years and which now seems an endless nightmare. From the North Sea to the Persian Gulf, battle follows battle, and in periods of truce the slaughter continues on a smaller scale through raids, patrol actions and isolated assaults.

And the wonderful thing is that everyone is winning: the Germans defeat the Russians and the Russians defeat the Austrians and Turks; the Turks defeat the British, but the British and French defeat the Germans; the Italians defeat the Austrians, who in turn defeat the Serbs and Romanians. Day after day, flat and colourless military communiqués list this stream of victories without hope, giving substance to the suspicion that perhaps the war will never end, that Europe's future destiny will be to consume its youth in a senseless slaughter. The cheerful atmosphere of former times has become that of an immense entrenched camp in which fifty million military uniforms circulate among the besieged, the besiegers and fearful neutrals.

Yet even amid the monotony of the hecatomb, something was changing: living conditions were steadily deteriorating. During 1914 the armies had fought with the means and resources accumulated in military depots during the years of peace, in preparation for a war modelled on the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 - as might indeed have been possible without British intervention and without the "miracle" of the Marne. In 1915 they had drawn on the reserves of money and industrial equipment available in the belligerent countries and, within limits, in neutral countries with which trade was possible. But these resources too had been gradually exhausted, so that any further war effort could be made only at the expense of the civilian population, whose standard of living had to be compressed and lowered if the fighting fronts were to be supplied. From the second half of 1916, therefore, the conditions of the

civilian population underwent, almost simultaneously in every nation at war, a sudden and painful tightening. This was the only sign that the conflict would not last for ever: hunger and poverty might compel surrender.

At the beginning of 1917, daily life in Italy, while not tragic, was sad and squalid. The newspapers were full of comments and reports on the supply difficulties afflicting the German and Austro-Hungarian Empires; yet at the foot of the same page there often appeared a list of the steamships - "steamers" was the preferred term at the time - flying the flags of Entente nations that were being sunk every day by German submarines.

The reduction in sea and rail traffic, lower domestic production and the army's enormous consumption had already made many essential goods scarce. Even basic necessities were beginning to run short, and the cost-of-living index had more than doubled since the beginning of the war.

Nor were the increases gradual and predictable. Goods that had long been sold at unchanged prices suddenly became dearer without any apparent explanation. Violent curses were then directed against shopkeepers, accused of exploiting public hunger in order to extort larger profits. The socialists and former neutralists protested with ill-concealed satisfaction; the "interventionist" parties and advocates of summary methods protested too, casually demanding that the guilty be shot out of hand; and the poor wretches who had to make the daily accounts balance also protested, though in a quieter and more resigned tone. Everyone demanded the imposition of official price ceilings, despite the warnings of a few sceptics. But price-control experiments attempted in a great many municipalities immediately produced disastrous results, the same as those that had followed Diocletian's Edict or the proclamations of Grand Chancellor Antonio Ferrer, familiar from Manzoni. Instead of falling in price, goods vanished from the shop windows and were sold under the counter at much higher prices.

But the law is protected by the policeman; and the newspapers, united in this despite their differing political opinions, applauded the police officers and municipal guards who entered shops as supposed customers, established that the price ceiling had been violated and earned public merit by fining and arresting a few unlucky shopkeepers.

Alongside price ceilings, internal export prohibitions aggravated supply difficulties. Month by month, Italy seemed to be returning to the economy of the feudal age. Prefects and mayors, interpreting a decree of the King's Lieutenant broadly, had begun issuing ordinances forbidding scarce foodstuffs to be exported beyond the provinces or municipalities they administered. This caused shortages in other areas and retaliatory bans there on substitute goods: thus Rovigo and Rome prohibited the export of maize, while Messina prohibited the export of pasta and Pisa, Bari and Perugia that of oil, which consequently became scarce in Emilia and Lombardy.

There was, however, one essential commodity, bread, in whose supply no mistakes could be permitted. By the end of 1916 the danger of famine was becoming serious because at the beginning of July the government had reduced the official price of wheat from 40 to 36 lire per quintal, when farmers had reasonably expected an increase. In a period of rising prices, the reduction was motivated by the conviction that this was the best way to lower the price of bread. The consequences of the measure quickly dispelled every illusion: cultivation was reduced just as the transport of North American wheat across the Atlantic was becoming increasingly unsafe; and peasants, accustomed from time immemorial to eating polenta and pulses, began to appreciate bread, which it was scarcely profitable to sell, or preferred to feed the grain to livestock, since the price of fodder grains - which the legislators had forgotten to control - had meanwhile risen sharply.

As early as the summer of 1916 the soldiers' bread ration had been reduced from 750 to 600 grams a day. The purpose of the measure, however, had been to reduce waste rather than impose another sacrifice on the army, although General Cadorna considered it immoral that economy should begin with the fighting men. But the worsening situation required much more severe restrictions, which came into force throughout Italy on 10 January 1917. The most important of these, devised by officials of the newly created Ministry of Agriculture, consisted in making the bread itself almost inedible. Bakers were therefore required to make a single large, badly risen loaf, on which it was forbidden to make the customary transverse cut that assists baking. This bread, heavy with water and bran, also had to be sold stale on the day after it was baked. To correct its indigestible composition with a breath of poetry, the cruel imagination of the Ministry of Agriculture decided to reward the bakers who best produced the prescribed "war bread" by awarding them a special commemorative medal, for which Gabriele D'Annunzio was asked to compose the inscription. The imaginative poet accepted the commission and dictated:

> *The bread of war - made by a pure hand - is the bread of communion - in which the whole fatherland - transubstantiated, lives - like the Body of the Redeemer - in the Eucharistic Offering - Year of Victory MCMXVII.*

When, however, a number of willing bakers wished to enter the competition, they could not discover whom they were supposed to approach in order to learn its rules.

The bread remained inedible despite the verses and medals, but, to the legislators' surprise, its consumption did not fall. Indeed, the first statistics available from Turin showed that consumption had increased after the measures were adopted, because waste had increased. The Corriere della Sera noted with indignation that at mealtimes in Milan bricklayers could be seen practising target shooting at passers-by with pellets of bread crumb. A controversy then arose among the "experts" over whether, instead of underbaked bread, it would not have been better to adopt an "overbaked" formula - dehydrated bread in the form of breadsticks or hardtack. Consumption would then have been reduced not by disgusting the stomach but by tiring the jaws.

There was no longer time, however, for a second experiment in "bad bread without limit", and rationing had to be introduced. On the price of wheat too the government was forced to yield, raising it in February 1917 to 45 lire per quintal. The belated measure, which to some extent rewarded those who had delayed delivering their wheat, was intended to increase the production of spring wheat. The hope was largely disappointed, because many fields had already been devoted to other crops or seed was unavailable, and because even the new price was no longer profitable. The 1917 harvest was therefore ten million quintals smaller than that of 1916, with serious consequences culminating in the tragic days in Turin in August 1917.

Other measures sought to reduce particular forms of consumption by restricting the weekly days of sale: no meat on Thursday and Friday, no sweets for three consecutive days. Every provision provoked the loudest complaints from those affected, each of whom felt that he alone was paying the price of the war. The confectioners duly passed a resolution asking that the prohibition on sales be imposed on alternate days, thereby evading the restrictions in substance. But on 10 March a summary ordinance ended all discussion by prohibiting the sale of sweets of every kind. Even sugared almonds for weddings disappeared, immediately replaced by elegant lucky charms; only certain cakes made without flour, eggs or sugar were permitted to circulate, and they apparently found courageous buyers.

Waste, although in any case inevitable, was also caused by ration cards, whose introduction the Honourable Canepa, commissioner of the Special Committee on Consumption, authorised in a circular sent to the prefects on 1 March. Rationing levelled out individual consumption that varied greatly owing

to the social composition of the Italian population and regional differences. Although theoretically better remedies existed, this was the simplest and least unpopular: nothing had ever so fascinated the common people as the belief that the "gentlemen" were suffering the same harassment.

In any event, the situation was becoming urgent. Long queues began to form outside every food shop, and people who had previously grumbled in isolation now began to protest in groups, blaming the shopkeeper, the prefect, the government, the war and those who did not suffer it but had imposed it. When a patient customer who entered a grocer's shop to buy one hundred grams of sugar was told that he must also purchase tins of preserves, coffee substitute and other goods of no use to him, his first instinct was to strangle the shopkeeper. Then, after a long quarrel while the queue rumbled behind him, he would leave exasperated, thinking that those people who whispered that it was time to end the whole business at any cost were not wrong.

Most of the time these were minor disturbances, but sometimes, especially in the large industrial centres, the scuffles became serious enough to keep prefects and commissioners of Public Security on the alert. Long reports were sent to the Ministry of the Interior in Rome describing the crowd's increasingly unyielding mood.

Semi-luxury goods such as coffee and cocoa had become unobtainable, and far more necessary items sought by unsatisfied appetites were also scarce. To reduce the hardship caused by the shortage of sugar, the state put saccharin-laced sugar on sale - appropriately called "state sugar" - but a rumour immediately spread, and prompt denials failed to eliminate the doubts, that this type of sugar poisoned children. To reduce paper consumption, newspapers, already normally restricted to four pages, had several times a month to appear on only two sides, printed in microscopic type in order to contain all the incoming news. Those early months of 1917 therefore saw a continuous rain of decrees and regulations designed to restrict consumption: the chaos of distribution did not cease, but became bureaucratised chaos.

Naturally, what was the rule for the many did not apply to war profiteers or to the few who, without falling into that category, were directly or indirectly favoured by the war. For them there were neither consumption restrictions nor long queues. Nor, in order to obtain additional sweetening substances, was it necessary to follow the advice of Minister Bianchi, who encouraged domestic beekeeping, and fill one's rooms with hives: one simply paid more. This presented no difficulty for those "sharks". Their problem, if anything, was how to spend their surplus money. Opportunities were not lacking.

Despite the "austere" wartime climate, racecourses remained open in the great cities. From the Capannelle in Rome or San Siro in Milan, caravans of elegant motor cars - never short of the heavily rationed petrol granted only for "proven reasons of general interest" - returned to the city late on Sunday afternoons laden with beautiful women and cheerful gentlemen. Old and new wealth dressed its ladies in the latest Paris fashions, and magnificent toilettes were displayed at first nights at the opera, at the theatre and even in the overcrowded cinemas. Never had the trade in paintings, even worthless daubs, and antiques flourished as it did then.

The winter of 1916-17 was exceptionally severe. The soldiers in the trenches noticed it; throughout Italy, so did everyone obliged to live and work pressed against a stove fed by the few pieces of coal or wood that current scarcity and therefore high prices allowed; and so did those who had no financial worries. Leaving La Scala after the evening performance, they searched in vain for taxis or carriages to take themselves and their ladies home, since the ladies could not walk even the short snowy distance - Milan had no fewer than twelve substantial snowfalls that winter. The few cabmen were besieged and, themselves wartime profiteers, charged whatever they pleased, with uncivil manners and demands for

generous tips. The shrewd and provident, who had reserved transport for their departure when they arrived, often found that it had vanished with their money. No category in Milan was more hated at that time than the cabmen, except the Central Powers.

The crisis caused by reduced coal supplies was menacing and pregnant with serious consequences. Imports of this fuel, which immediately before the war had approached one million tonnes a month, fell to 720,000 tonnes in the second half of 1916 and remained at about 420,000 tonnes throughout 1917. The Italian government had invited the British President of the Board of Trade, Runciman, to Italy to study the problem of coal supplies, for which Italy was wholly dependent on British goodwill. At Pallanza in August 1916 the general lines of an agreement were established with our Ministers of Industry and Transport; it was subsequently perfected, and its details were made public on 3 November 1916. Great Britain undertook to supply coal at a maximum price of 29 to 30 shillings per tonne FOB at ports on the Bristol Channel, while freight rates were fixed at 59 shillings and 6 pence per tonne. The freight-rate "ceiling" might have worked, with coercion, if British or Italian ships had been available; but they were all employed elsewhere. Nor were there police officers capable of enforcing the ceiling on neutral shipping, which was already demanding 75 shillings, with an upward tendency, and consequently deserted the Italian ports.

It was, moreover, difficult to increase the size of the Italian merchant fleet, which at the beginning of the war amounted to only a little over two million tonnes. New construction would have absorbed labour and materials required instead by the war industries. New ships, still available on the international market, might have been purchased, but the government was reluctant to pay the high prices demanded, since the average cost had risen from 145 lire per tonne in 1914 to 1,000-1,200 lire, and there was a fear - unfortunately unfounded - that a premature end to the war would devalue the large capital investment required.

On 5 December, when the Chamber reopened, Prime Minister Boselli had declared:

> *Urgent provision must be made for the present, and urgent provision must be made for the future, as regards the creation of a merchant fleet which the enemy's fierce menace thins and scatters every day... By reducing heating and lighting, and by every reasonable restraint, it is necessary to remedy the disastrous shortage of coal. Other forms of consumption must be regulated and reduced.*

Coal stocks, which had begun to fall dangerously, reached at the end of 1916 a level below one month's requirements. It was a hand-to-mouth existence: steelworks, gasworks and other industries warned that they might have to close their plants temporarily or reduce production. A shudder ran through the government, which on 9 January 1917 ordered a census of coal held by private persons. But a census did not produce coal; it merely established that none existed. And the worst was still to come.

In February the Central Powers launched unrestricted submarine warfare: ships found within certain geographical coordinates would be shelled or torpedoed without warning. The curve of sinkings rose vertically, and the Mediterranean, the most heavily tormented of all seas, quickly became a cemetery for every kind of vessel. Neither freight rates, still fixed at their old levels, nor insurance premiums now covered the risks of such dangerous navigation. Many ships therefore fell ill with "influenza". Repairs took an interminable time; loading and unloading were prolonged for unspecified reasons; ships that had arrived safe and sound in distant, peaceful ports took long holidays, to the mutual satisfaction of crews and shipowners, convinced that for the good of the "fatherland" it was better to preserve the fleet for the future.

The fatherland, however, was suffering in the present, and every possible expedient was chaotically adopted to overcome the difficulties of the moment. Efforts were made to intensify the extraction of

domestic fuel, generally low-calorific lignite. Axes were taken up and entire mountains were stripped of trees, destroying a wealth accumulated over a thousand years which would require a century to restore. The supply of town gas was reduced - in many cases it was temporarily suspended because coal had completely run out. Week after week more trains were cancelled, while 25,000 railway wagons were required to carry from France the coal that could not arrive by sea. To transport wheat from Genoa to the mills around the city, trams from the urban network were used during the night. But an industrialist who needed coal did not have only the enemy's menace to contend with: he encountered an equally formidable opponent in the wartime bureaucracy. In the Corriere della Sera of 22 January 1917, Luigi Einaudi listed some of the obstacles placed along the "Way of the Cross" of obtaining fuel:

> To obtain coal, the private industrialist must request permission from a regional coal committee... which forwards the application to the Central Coal Committee in Rome, which in turn sends it to the London commission of [Senator] Mayor Des Planches, who makes provision through the Comité Central du Ravitaillement. If coal is required by establishments working for war mobilisation, the application must instead be addressed to the regional industrial-mobilisation committees, which, through the Under-Secretariat for Arms and Munitions, apply to a military commission in London. The railways, finally, have their own freight and coal office in Cardiff. Alongside all these committees, with the exception of the railways, operates the Maritime and Railway Traffic Committee, which, at the Ministry of Transport, has the task of procuring the tonnage necessary to carry the coal. Once the coal has reached Genoa, the odyssey of the committees is not over. In order to obtain wagons, the industrialist must prove to the Provincial Coal Commission... that he truly requires that particular quantity of coal; and if he has obtained the wagons from it, managed to load them within the prescribed number of days and been able to behold the coal in his yard, he must prove to the Commission for the Coal Census that his need is more urgent than that of industrialists working in the same locality. Both commissions depend on the competent minister or ministers, who have the right to requisition the coal at the official controlled price, which may be lower than the purchase price.

So it was with coal, and so it was with steel and other strategic materials. Silver coins were already beginning to be hoarded, and their absence complicated every small commercial transaction. Subscription campaigns to offer gold to the fatherland followed one another, and the energetic General Dall'Olio, Under-Secretary for Arms and Munitions, issued warm appeals for the voluntary surrender of precious metals. But he or his collaborators then neglected to organise their collection, and willing citizens were sent from one body to another because no one was able to accept their offerings.

Many of these inconveniences were due to inexperience. Since numerous wholly unforeseen problems demanded hurried solutions, it was believed that a newly arisen difficulty could be remedied by the simplest method available: an act of authority. But it was immediately discovered that this had the most unexpected repercussions; and in order to deal with those too, other centres of the national economy were tormented, until everything had to be regulated and everyone controlled, with far more trust placed in repression than in common sense. A perfect repressive organisation would have required a policeman beside every citizen; but then there would have been a shortage of soldiers - real soldiers, who had to fight the enemy rather than violators of price controls.

In the other belligerent countries things proceeded in roughly the same way. The consequences were felt more severely in Italy than elsewhere only because, apart from Russia, she was the poorest and weakest of the great nations at war. Yet even in Great Britain, the traditional land of personal liberty, the economic bureaucracy had expanded to the limits of the incredible and, in the land of coal, had succeeded in causing a coal famine. In Tsarist Russia, the mistakes of others were repeated, compounded by more widespread corruption and greater indifference to the sufferings of the population. France, the most self-sufficient of the Entente nations, was subject to fewer food restrictions, but

suffered from the loss of much of the industrial production concentrated in the northern departments occupied by the Germans.

The enemy bureaucracy was no more efficient. In Germany, requisitions and price ceilings, organised with scientific German precision, wore down the productive machine no less than the enemy did. In the winter of 1917 a silent and sorrowful crowd moved through the streets of Berlin and, returning home at dusk, waited in coats in the darkness for the hour of sleep and oblivion. In the Austro-Hungarian Empire, riots over the lack of food, protests against hunger and scandals over war supplies followed one another in rapid succession. In February 1917 no fewer than ninety deputies were accused in the Hungarian Chamber of dishonesty and fraud. One of them, a certain Ivanka, regularly sold the government cattle stuffed with water, which the poor animals were forced to drink because they had been fed extremely salty fodder.

And every government found in the mistakes of the others an easy justification for its own.

The Entente was not without reliable information on the internal situation of the Central Powers. Sources included the enemy newspapers themselves, reports in neutral newspapers and statements by prisoners and deserters, not to mention the intelligence services. The small volume of trade that Germany maintained with Switzerland, Holland, the Nordic countries and the United States of America before the declaration of war made it inevitable that confidential economic and financial information should also filter through. Taken together, the material formed a reasonably coherent whole and made it possible to derive an objective picture of the Central Powers: it could be concluded that in food supplies they were decidedly worse off than the Entente and that their internal difficulties were certainly no smaller.

But the world war had revived interest in an old form of attack and defence: propaganda, to which humanity from time immemorial had attributed miracle-working powers for galvanising depressed and suffering spirits. If the enemy were depicted as fierce and cowardly, as violators of virgins and cutters-off of children's hands, cruel and stupid - this was the core of the cunning calculation - the soldiers would fight better and civilians would direct their curses against the enemy rather than their own rulers. To avoid dangerous generalisations, it was also necessary to portray oneself as noble, brave, good and possibly naive. The Italian press was no exception. Italians - or rather those among them who could read and wished to do so - were abundantly informed about other people's miseries.

When further restrictions had to be imposed, comparison with France and Britain served to demonstrate that the new sacrifices were insignificant beside those the allies had already endured for some time. Details about the enemy were more abundant in inverse proportion to the ease of learning them. They were attributed to neutral travellers, invariably unnamed, who had personally sampled edible rubber sausage, from which the knife bounced like a tyre and which was enclosed in a skin that had to be left on the plate so that it could be used an indefinite number of times. These travellers also knew everything about the riots caused by shortages in Kiel, Lübeck and Munich, which Turkish troops had suppressed because German troops had refused to fire on the crowd; or they had seen the German review commissions at work in Turkey, where, by a reversal of fortune, they combed through every Ottoman subject from sixteen to sixty in order to conscript the shirkers; or they had witnessed the terror that seized the inhabitants of Munich when the intrepid Beauchamps, an ace of French aviation, appeared high over the city in his tiny tricolour aircraft and wrought slaughter among the military objectives in the area, which were immediately surrounded by cordons of troops to conceal the extremely serious damage. The Russians also made their contribution, for documents that had fallen into their hands during skirmishes south of Riga showed that the Germans intended to replace the soldiers' daily ration with crow meat.

On 6 January 1917 the Corriere della Sera carried the headline:

> *Compulsory communal meal for all Germans?*

and on the 11th:

> *The twenty-four-hour working day to be adopted in every German factory.*

"The Austro-Germans," wrote the Popolo d'Italia in the same days - Benito Mussolini was directing it from the front -

> *have killed women, mutilated children and poisoned the inhabitants of occupied countries by sending tubercular and syphilitic men among them; everywhere they have committed monstrous outrages through the hands of ignoble mercenaries.*

On 26 January 1917 the Belgian socialist Jaspar had given a lecture at the Teatro Lirico in Milan, speaking as a genuine eyewitness of German atrocities in Belgium. "You resisted us," a German commander outside Liège had exclaimed, "and we shall be cannibals." And they had kept their word!

The Kaiser was portrayed as a dull-witted and impotent ogre, a mixture of Nero and Attila. Professor Antonini, director of the Mombello asylum, devoted a lecture to examining him by means of a lively diagnosis at a distance as a "complex figure of a congenital physical degenerate". Despite the general shortage of paper, this lecture found space in the June 1917 issue of Lettura under the title The Kaiser in the Light of Psychiatry.

The paper war between the opposing lines reached its climax when the rumour spread that Germany had industrialised the use of corpses, which were processed in special chemical plants, the Kadaververwertungsanstalten. "The Germans," their opponents said, "sweep up their dead from the battlefields, load them onto trains and send them to the furnaces, turning them into glycerine, soap and butter." "It is not true," those concerned replied. "We use only animal carcasses. And that is our business. If you do not know German, open a dictionary and see what Kadaver means." The dispute then broadened with the intervention of philologists on both sides: one party demonstrated that, yes, Kadaver generally meant an animal carcass, but that in such-and-such an eighteenth-century book, on such-and-such a page, it had also been used of human beings; the other accused them of being beasts and of never having understood anything about German Kultur. The usual unnamed witnesses were called in to confirm one version or the other. When its time had passed, the dispute naturally died away. Only after the war was it learned that the legend had been invented by General Charteris's British intelligence service.

Disoriented by this information, public opinion reacted with growing disbelief:

> "The Prussians are harsh." - "True." - "The Prussians are cruel." - "Possible." - "The Prussians kill children." - "Not very likely." - "The Prussians are cannibals; until very recent times human flesh was eaten at banquets in Silesia." - "That is incredible." - "But then perhaps the rest is not true either. Perhaps Prussians, Austrians and Hungarians are decent people like ourselves. Perhaps it is all propaganda. Perhaps the Austrian airmen did not drop sweets containing cholera bacilli at Codigoro, as stated in an official communiqué signed by General Escard, commander of the Bologna Army Corps. But then perhaps General Escard put the bacilli in them himself..."

Propaganda too obeys its own laws, and its mechanism is irreversible. Once the ineffectiveness of exaggeration had become apparent, it was not easy to reverse course. The dose therefore had to be increased, and every incredible report had to be followed by one still more incredible, in the hope that part of the preceding one might be absorbed: an endless process whose development could not be foreseen. The embarrassment created by this system was particularly evident in estimates of enemy strength. In every battle Austrian losses were assessed as much greater than ours; the Anglo-French, for

their part, systematically overestimated German losses, so that it had become difficult to explain how the Central Powers were still standing and how the German army, at the beginning of 1917, contained 700,000 more men than a year earlier.

It had repeatedly been said that every able-bodied man between eighteen and forty-five had been mobilised, and it had been said and repeated that the second lines and rear areas had been combed out. Therefore, it followed, the Central Powers were mobilising for assault formations even consumptives, men with terminal heart disease and men with a glass eye; if the war lasted a little longer, the Germans would be forced to send the blind and the insane into the line.

Propaganda against Germany was accompanied by fear, and by no means an unjustified fear. At the High Commands considerable confidence was affected, but within Italy the word "Germany" still inspired a certain awe. General Wilson nevertheless exaggerates in his diary when he says that, on arriving in Rome at the beginning of January 1917, he was struck by the number of Germans still living there, by the sympathy they inspired and by the terror Italians displayed towards the Boche soldiers.

After all, how many surprises the Germans had produced: the 420s, asphyxiating gas, unsinkable battleships! Now it seemed that they were fitting out a fleet of a thousand submarines in order to unleash a war on shipping on an unprecedented scale. Along the Western Front, Marshal Hindenburg - that titan whose squat, square figure gave friend and foe alike the impression of a Viking divinity carved in granite, a divinity that had never lost a battle and could not lose a war - was said to have built a wall of reinforced concrete and barbed wire. Behind it he awaited the unwary Allies, ready, once they exposed themselves, to hurl them back in blood and bring them to the desperate conclusion that Germany could neither be defeated nor dislodged from her positions.

And what secret weapons did Germany have in reserve? Among British troops the legend was already widespread that the Germans could make it rain whenever they wished and could bog down every British offensive in the mud of the northern lowlands. If they had perfected new means of attack, would it be possible to intervene promptly and successfully? Or what if the Central Powers, exploiting their position, concentrated even a modest fraction of their enormous army of 370 divisions and hurled it against Italy, as they had against Serbia in 1915 and Romania in 1916?

Such a hypothesis was by no means irrational. During the spring of 1917 a persistent rumour - deliberately encouraged by the Central Powers - circulated that a great attack against Italy was being prepared, perhaps even through Switzerland. Nor was the strategic situation of our front reassuring. Fortunately, the Russian colossus was more or less immobilising 140 enemy divisions on the Eastern Front; as long as that lasted, major surprises were unlikely. But would it last? The strangest rumours circulated: they were whispered, denied, spread again and denied again. People did not understand, or preferred not to think about it, but a cold unease was in the air.

Patriotic rhetoric, propaganda's sister, did not disdain the constant use of a selected stock of arguments intended to keep the belligerent spirit alive in the army and the country. Gabriele D'Annunzio was the model of the age, and unlike his imitators he was highly skilled in the art of manipulating words. Many sins could be forgiven him, because he possessed uncommon physical courage. It was by then accepted that he was a hothead, but it was difficult to judge severely a man who, after praising war in a large company, was now consistently making it in its most dangerous forms among a far smaller company. People recalled with emotion the words he had declaimed to the crowd from the rock at Quarto on 5 May 1915, a few days before our entry into the war:

> *Blessed are those who possess the most, for they will be able to give more, to burn more.*

Blessed are those who are twenty years old, with a chaste mind, a tempered body and a courageous mother.

Blessed are those who, waiting and trusting, did not dissipate their strength, but preserved it in the discipline of the warrior.

Blessed are those who disdained barren loves, that they might be virgins for this first and last love.

... ...

Blessed are the young who hunger and thirst for glory, for they shall be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall wipe away shining blood and bind up radiant pain.

Having fled Italy covered in debts, certainly neither chaste in mind nor disdainful of barren loves, D'Annunzio spoke with effrontery and innocence of things in which he believed, mixing actions and words: one day infantryman, airman or sailor, the next lover and tireless poet, playing out his final youth with the ardent spirit of a corrupted Garibaldian.

His comrades-in-arms were at once amused and carried away, for his eccentric student-like bravado was always astonishing. Having appointed himself patron of the air arm, the poet lived in close friendship with the most famous pilots. At the opening of the Tenth Battle of the Isonzo, he gave his final recommendations to the squadrons about to depart, with a lyricism unusual in military prose:

The great assembly of the wings of war is summoned above the firing line at the very hour when our heroic infantry will hurl itself into the assault. The rhythmic roar from the air will accompany the impetuous waves.

In August 1917 a formation of Caproni aircraft was ready to leave for Pola to bomb its military installations. D'Annunzio had forcibly wrested permission by persistently harassing the Supreme Command, which believed it more useful to employ the aircraft against the Chiapovano valley, through which the Austrians supplied the Bainsizza. Before the aircraft departed, the customary "hurrah!" shouted by the crews offended his sensibility as a latter-day Latin. He imposed silence and said:

Does it not seem to you that this cry is ill suited to Italian mouths? From now on your cry will be alalà, with which Achilles urged his horses into battle. The barbarous hip! will be replaced by the sweet and sonorous Latin exclamation eja! At Pola, when all the bombs have been dropped, each crew, before setting out on the return journey, will utter the cry amid the barrage fire.

Ladies and young ladies of the Italian bourgeoisie sighed as they dreamed of him and his fateful characters - Stelio Effrena, La Foscarina, Paolo Tarsis and Vana - and most of them did not know that he was a full fifty-three years old. In the enemy camp D'Annunzio enjoyed equal popularity of a negative kind. A German novelist, Richard Voss, who had lived for many years in the peninsula, made him the protagonist of an anti-Italian novel with the significant title Et Tu, Brute?, describing him as a cesspool of moral iniquity and the manifest demonstration of the corrupt Latin soul.

The government pampered him because he was not an idol who could easily be replaced, and because it was not easy to find someone who could improvise equally well on stale bread and the intervention of the United States of America. When his eighty-year-old mother died in January 1917, D'Annunzio was overwhelmed by messages from the highest authorities. Cadorna did not fail to send one; and Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, Minister of the Interior, sent him telegrammatic condolences in which he attempted to write in the D'Annunzian manner:

May love for this mother common to us all, of whom you are so admirably the poet and the soldier, comfort you in bearing the grief caused by the loss of the blessed woman who, in the veneration and glory of her son, earned the nation's grateful reverence and now the heartfelt mourning of every Italian heart.

Not everyone, however, was D'Annunzian. Young intellectuals such as Prezzolini, Papini and De Robertis held a modest opinion of his inspiration. Commenting on the Quarto speech, Ardengo Soffici had written:

Having seen Gabriele D'Annunzio's pompous, empty, painful and hairdresser-like prattle on the rock at Quarto; having seen the foolish, grotesque and pitiable monument by... Baroni erected on that same rock, which the sea, we pray, may swallow on a day more glorious than 5 May... one asks oneself: Are these symbols and omens for the Italy of tomorrow?

Benedetto Croce too, although on the worst of terms with the young nationalists, had found on aesthetic grounds that "Arm the prow and sail towards the world", "The pious virginity of the Dardanelles" and the whole "Oration of Quarto" by the former poet - as he maliciously called the wartime D'Annunzio - were inflated, insipid and "unworthy".

Farther down the social and hierarchical scale, enthusiasm was even cooler. Workers and peasants - the overwhelming majority of the nation - knew very little about D'Annunzio, and what little they knew did not appeal to them. A man who spoke of the "horrible stench of peace" could not win the applause of the fighting common people. The soldiers wallowing in the mud of the trenches thought that, all things considered, D'Annunzio had a fine life compared with their sufferings; nor were they so greedy for glory that they wished to be suffocated by it. The poet discovered that he did not enjoy popularity among the humblest when, on 15 July 1917 at Santa Maria la Longa, the 141st and 142nd Regiments of the Catanzaro Brigade mutinied and the soldiers attempted to storm Count Colloredo's palace, where they believed D'Annunzio was living, with the cries: "Down with the war!... Death to D'Annunzio!... We want peace."

D'Annunzio's opulent verbosity also inspired figures of higher rank and lesser ability. The rhetoric of 1917 had been inaugurated by Senator Blaserna, Vice-President of the Senate, who during a visit to the front had been given the honour of addressing the King with the New Year's message:

Sire! Here, in the presence of the snow-covered Alps, which proclaim the frontiers that nature and right have willed and still will to mark the meeting place of the Italian people with other peoples; here, where narrow plains and treacherous hills, contested and conquered with blood, bear lofty witness through the centuries to the Latin spirit renewed within us, the Senate offers Your Majesty its reverent homage of good wishes and hopes, the wishes and hopes of the entire people. Every region of our country - from those upon which nature has smiled benignly and which lavish the riches that industry has increased and will further increase for the nation's prosperity, to those where human labour struggles harshly with the soil to win a livelihood - every order of citizens, from those who give the country the work of their minds to the multitude of strong and generous men born and raised on lands from which they demand their bread through daily toil, not always adequately rewarded: all our people willed the war...

The archaic style was even more congenial to the venerable Prime Minister, who had sat at his school desk amid the thunder of the epic events of 1848. On 17 January, during a visit in Rome to the Committee for Civil Organisation, one of the many bodies founded at the time, Boselli wished to exalt both women's work in the war and the war itself:

The war has benefited many things. It has benefited national unity, and we see this among the soldiers from every part of Italy, united by a common feeling on the battlefield... The war has therefore made us better.

A few weeks earlier, responding to an invitation issued on the occasion of the patriotic publication Flames of Italy, Boselli had written:

> Only one vision moves our souls: the vision of the fatherland crowned with new glory, the vision of the fatherland raised again to new greatness through Italian virtue; only one resolve sets us aflame: we desire victory, and we shall have victory for the fatherland and for civilisation.

There were also men capable of expressing themselves in a less declamatory manner, although this caused them to be viewed with suspicion. Giovanni Giolitti, for example, had been placed beyond the pale of political life because he was incapable of bowing to the idea that the war had been necessary. On the same occasion he sent the following message to Flames of Italy:

> Fifteen months of war have shown that our population, when the honour and future of the fatherland are at stake, can endure the gravest sacrifices with unconquered fortitude. This magnificent steadfastness of the whole people has been worthily matched by the unsurpassable valour of our soldiers, who, serenely offering their lives for the fatherland, have bestowed the halo of victory upon the Italian flag. The struggle may still be long and bitter, but the profound accord between those who fight, ready to give their lives, and the country, resolved upon every sacrifice, will give us final victory and, with victory, the fulfilment of our national aspirations.

The rare proclamations that the sovereign addressed to the troops on particular anniversaries likewise provided examples of prose more restrained and spare than that favoured by the followers of D'Annunzio.

Two years of war had profoundly worn down the Italian intelligentsia. Benedetto Croce had been left almost alone in defending objectivity and the use of common sense in judging the enemy. Yet because his style, although clear, was regarded as professorial and pedantic, his far less consistent opponents enjoyed greater success - apart from the socialist intellectuals, who were known to oppose the war as a matter of party doctrine. Many scholars of great renown, Guglielmo Ferrero, Ettore Romagnoli and others, were engaged in demolishing German 'culture' and humanism, leaving Germany only that inferior form of thought known as science, the producer of heavy mortars and asphyxiating gases. Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, a professor at the University of Rome, emphasised Italy's great superiority over Germany:

> The speed with which Italy, in half a century, has organised a modern state upon millennial ruins and fused diverse and hostile peoples into a unified body, giving them within a few decades that living spoken and written language which men of letters had been elaborating since the fourteenth century, is one of the greatest marvels that can be cited in honour of the civic virtues of a race. Italy feels within itself the capacity to become a people of one hundred million inhabitants and knows that the means of developing this capacity are being denied to it.

According to Professor Coletti, the undisputed superiority of the Italian army - which could count on five million able-bodied men between eighteen and forty-five, half of them peasants - arose from its social composition, because countrymen were healthier, more resistant and more disciplined, and were indefatigable workers.

The Duke of Colonna di Cesaro, a Member of Parliament, instead explained that Dalmatian civilisation was wholly and exclusively Italian, just as Dalmatia was geographically and historically Italian. Moreover, even had these arguments not been sufficient, Italy required the region for its own security. This thesis was especially dear to Baron Sidney Sonnino, the Foreign Minister and thus the man responsible for Italy's Adriatic policy. He cited submarine warfare as evidence of what our fate would be if the opposite shore were in enemy hands, thereby revealing his incompetence in matters of submarines.

Meanwhile committees, leagues and associations multiplied for the protection - against the aggression of Germanism - of Italian identity, or of Latin civilisation, which allowed France to be included, or of democracy, which broadened the club to admit the United Kingdom and the United States, or of peace-loving peoples, among whom Russia could be admitted with a certain effort. Like the more elementary propaganda about German atrocities, this kind of activity generally needed some concrete action to follow its exertions. One 'scandal' to be eliminated, for example, was the fact that several hundred enemy subjects still moved freely within our country. They were clergymen and directors of museums or cultural institutes, exempt from military obligations in their countries of origin and therefore not recalled, people who were generally harmless and loyal to the host country in which most had lived for many years.

There had nevertheless been some attempts at espionage. The most serious involved Monsignor Gerlach, a member of the Pope's secretariat, who had felt the overpowering call of his second identity, since he was also a major in the Bavarian army. Innocent and guilty were placed in the same cage, and the police ordered internment or expulsion without drawing very fine distinctions. Even the great Julius Beloch, who for decades had taught the history of Rome to Italian youth, had to set out for compulsory residence. His chair was promptly seized by Ettore Pais, who since the beginning of the war had hidden in a drawer the signed photograph of his 'beloved master', the now-deceased Teuton Theodor Mommsen.

The established authorities possessed two weapons with which to manipulate public opinion and restrain its outbursts: censorship and repressive laws. It should not be imagined, however, that the Italian government was especially heavy-handed. In Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, who as Minister of the Interior was responsible for public order, political opportunism mingled with a genuine incapacity for violence. His thoughts were fixed on power and, with that prospect in mind, he did not wish to alienate the Giolittians, the Catholics or even the official Socialists, whom he might need when his hour came to become Prime Minister. His policy was therefore to 'harass the doves and protect the ravens', as Luigi Luzzatti said, quoting Juvenal.

Orlando intended to use the official Socialist representatives in Parliament to control and calm the Socialist electorate, which in the great industrial cities - especially Turin, the chief centre of the war industry - stood much farther to the left than its representatives. Costantino Lazzari, General Secretary of the Italian Socialist Party, was credited with the statement: 'We cannot accept indifference between an Austrian master and an Italian one. We intend neither to accept nor to sabotage the war.' This position was enough for Orlando and satisfied him.

Even the statement made by Treves in the Chamber on 12 July 1917 - 'Next winter, no longer in the trenches' - a paraphrase of a declaration made by Turati a few days earlier in the same place ('By next winter the war must no longer exist') acquired the subversive meaning later attributed to it only when detached from the context of his speech. The speech had a far more general and ambiguous tone, and concluded: 'A voice from every front delivers the ultimatum of life and death: next winter, no longer in the trenches.' It was much more a prediction than an incitement. Even the Honourable Morgari, one of Turin's most ardent Socialists, during the days of the Caporetto disaster whispered breathlessly to General Giardino, the resigning War Minister in the Boselli Cabinet: 'General, save Italy.'

The reason was that many representatives of 'official' Socialism - not to be confused with the 'reformists', against whom they waged a ferocious quarrel like betrayed lovers - belonged to the fourth species of Socialists, as Benedetto Croce defined them after listing the first three. In their hearts they rejoiced at victories and wept over defeats, but in newspapers, assemblies and public meetings they adopted a different pose for fear of losing control of the party. It was a Socialism that struck alternately

at hoop and barrel, more offensive in words and resolutions than in deeds: Socialism, in short, in both the good and bad senses of the phrase, Italian-style, always ready to speak of insurrection, but to carry it out only in a remote future when circumstances became favourable. Its conduct was therefore very different from Lenin's, for he understood that the favourable moment for unleashing the great upheaval was precisely the one in which the war had reached its height and general weariness and exhaustion were being felt with extreme intensity.

But the humble and simple people who had voted for the Socialist Party - that common crowd said to desire deception - were in fact deceived against their will and took literally the fiery words pronounced by their elected representatives. The result was a dull rumbling of discontent at home and greater impatience at the front. Catholic circles, more astute, declared themselves in favour of the war in public and against it in private - a private circle that often extended to the boundaries of the parish.

Censorship ought to have been the proper weapon for controlling and suppressing these spoken, written and printed manifestations, but it too had undergone a process of degeneration and become an instrument of ministerial arbitrariness. Its principal purpose was to protect the immunity of the rulers and to select the news which, in the government's judgement, the Italian people were capable of enduring. Naturally, censorship devastated the front pages of Avanti!, which often appeared as a blank sheet, and Antonio Gramsci's Grido del Popolo. It treated the Catholic and Giolittian press less destructively, but sometimes brushed even the 'interventionist' newspapers when their criticism of the government's work became too open.

The articles, and indeed the whole text, of opposition newspapers appeared convoluted and obscure. The need both to speak and not to speak, and to suggest rather than explain, severely tested their writers' stylistic inventiveness. In addition to parliamentary reports, Avanti! was confined to polemics against excess war profits - much to the annoyance of newspapers financed by the great industrial combines - and served as a guide and advice bulletin for pension claims and exemption procedures. In the Allied countries, however - not to mention the enemy states - the limits imposed by censorship were much more impassable than in Italy. They can be summed up in the words spoken by Aristide Briand in the French Chamber on 2 January 1917: 'Censorship must not apply only to military and diplomatic information. Instructions have been given that campaigns in favour of a peace different from the one we desire are not to be tolerated.' Our censorship nevertheless also raged against news arriving from Paris and London that had already been censored by their respective governments. When the Russian Revolution broke out, the information freely issued by the new Russian government was subjected to a meticulous decapitation.

The laws for repressing any act liable to discourage or diminish the war effort and public morale were modelled on those of the other belligerent nations and naturally tended to substitute courts-martial for ordinary civilian tribunals. Despite the gravity of the moment and the spread of crime, the police found time to concern themselves with very minor offences as well. On one occasion they decided to suppress, with lightning action, the circulation of anti-patriotic songs, which were sung quietly and sometimes not so quietly. A fine raid was carried out in Via Montenapoleone, Milan, where a dozen students were caught humming:

> General Cadorna
> has told the Queen:
> if she wants to see Trieste,
> she can see it on a postcard,
> ndi, nda, boom,
> to the roar of the cannon!

The following day, a nineteen-year-old postman, unaware that the law was lying in wait, was caught in the act of committing the same crime and dispatched at high speed within the walls of San Vittore prison.

Those who expressed heterodox opinions ran moderate but not negligible risks. Public establishments were warned not to admit among their customers those who habitually discussed high strategy, on pain of losing their licence. Schoolteachers had to take great care not to speak objectively about German culture if they wished to avoid transfer to less comfortable posts. This happened to a certain Professor Menghini of the secondary school in Livorno, who had expressed himself with 'excessive enthusiasm for German culture and discipline'.

A lawyer named Badini was arrested on the charge of spreading false and anti-national news in a public place. He had said - which was perfectly true - that in their recent defeat the Romanians had lost 160,000 prisoners and 400 guns, and he had declared himself opposed to the incorporation of Trieste and Dalmatia. At his trial in February he courageously upheld his views and received three months and fifteen days' imprisonment, but was acquitted on appeal 'because no offence existed'. The Countess de Beck was less fortunate: sentenced to six months on the same charges, she surrendered herself at the Mantellate prison in Florence to serve the sentence.

During the same period the novelist Virgilio Brocchi was completing the saccharine novel After My Own Heart, which later caused him trouble with the law. He was accused of having covertly incited our soldiers to fraternise with the enemy; of insinuating horror, discouragement and mockery of the aims of the war; of openly professing anti-political views; and finally of criticising the orders of the Supreme Command. Virgilio Brocchi liked to describe himself as a Socialist, although the Socialists regarded him as an academic remote from the world who wrote stories and novels for high society. He defended himself easily and was acquitted, though not before enjoying the halo of martyrdom. When an accused person lacked such fame and social position, however, the treatment was rougher, and the atmosphere of unease, if not terror, created by these measures advised most people to imitate the three monkeys: see nothing, say nothing, hear nothing.

Police work was far less effective against ordinary crime. The Supreme Command reported anxiously to the Minister of the Interior that offences within the mobilised army had risen alarmingly. Orlando defended and justified himself by saying that criminals, being on average young and healthy, had all ended up under arms. One would then have had to conclude that the society of outlaws had been enriched by many men rejected for military service, since crimes in the interior had increased in an even more striking proportion.

Tramcars were particularly infested with pickpockets, while luggage thefts were extremely numerous at the great railway stations. At night, daring gangs looted wagons standing in railway yards and successfully fought off the police in genuine battles. Wagons carrying food, clothing and footwear were the principal targets, sometimes with the connivance of railwaymen who shunted them onto remote and poorly supervised tracks. In one such case at Parma, fortunately discovered almost at once, the stolen goods - luxury shoes - were recovered by literally pulling them from the feet of attractive music-hall singers to whom their dishonest friends had presented them as gifts.

The moment favoured the fortunes of bold adventurers, and in an age of rapid emancipation the female sex could not fail to compete in impudence as well. A kind of Cagliostro in skirts had for several months been moving through the most elegant and expensive hotels and resorts of the large cities, leaving substantial unpaid bills behind her. Marchioness Sarah Altavilla was the title and name she had borrowed. What was whispered about her, and what the 'Marchioness' allowed people to say, was

designed automatically to provoke tears and admiration: an unredeemed Triestine, widow of a heroic second lieutenant killed in action, sister of another gallant officer now dead, a Red Cross lady and holder of the Silver Medal which she proudly wore on her breast, she had offered her blood for transfusions and pieces of her skin for plastic surgery on the face of a disfigured combatant. Since a train of frauds nevertheless followed her wanderings, the police investigated more closely and discovered that the beautiful Marchioness was in reality Giuseppina Pellanza, aged twenty-one, daughter of a Rimini shoemaker, long wanted for theft under a warrant issued by the Rome public prosecutor.

In that tense and bloody spring came one of the most sensational scandals of the period: the arrest of Count Luca Cortese. The episode was so dramatic that it displaced even the Russian Revolution and the battle of the Chemin des Dames from the newspaper front pages. On 4 May the daily papers, decorated with a single large full-page headline - 'Count Luca Cortese Arrested' - were literally snatched up. It seemed incredible that handcuffs could have closed around the wrists of such a man: a patron of artists, an intimate of ministers, a friend of great industrialists and an industrialist himself. The charge was thoroughly vulgar: passing forged bills of exchange amounting to several million lire.

For a moment many powerful men trembled, because once the machinery of justice had been set in motion it might uncover the innumerable irregularities that had preceded the multimillionaire patron's latest false step. The dismay did not last long. Events of too great a magnitude pressed on and submerged what appeared to be an item of crime reporting but belonged to the history of manners. Within a few days 'Count Luca Cortese' had become 'the self-styled Count Luca Cortese', then, more briskly, 'Luca Cortese' or simply 'Cortese', and finally 'the defendant Cortese'. People who had notoriously been close to him seemed barely able to remember his name. Their business relations with him, they said, had consisted of some chance encounter in the remote past, when Cortese had merely offered them an aperitif, an 'Americano'.

The war and its consequent difficulties had not halted Luca Cortese in his audacious enterprises or his sweet life. A handsome man, he considered himself exceptionally beautiful and was a fortunate and elegant seducer. To the very end he refused to contradict his reputation. As soon as he was taken to prison, he addressed the warders with aristocratic affability and made his first request: a bottle of eau de Cologne.

Formerly a regular officer, he had resigned and devoted himself to journalism, literature and the art of undressing beautiful women. His fortune dated from the Libyan War, during which successful speculation in military supplies had provided him with a solid financial platform. By 1917, at only thirty-five, he had reached the summit of his career and was blessed by the three Graces: wealth, health and exemption from military service. His final undertaking, the one that was to bring about his fall, was connected with financing a grandiose project to 'nationalise' the Italian theatre, as he put it - that is, to create a single cartel embracing all the theatrical companies operating in Italy.

'The theatre must be nationalised,' he kept telling Marco Praga, whose vanity he attempted to flatter by offering him the post of artistic director of the consortium, 'and above all it must be moralised, so that it may worthily represent the new and great Italy within and beyond its frontiers.' People of less than irreproachable morality would be excluded from the circle regardless of their talent. Cortese applied a far more generous standard to himself. In his autobiography he wrote:

> During the years of my sensual corruption I sometimes delighted in contemplating delicate and perfidious lesbian loves; at other times I did not disdain to lie with several women at once; but I never took pleasure in half-measures or little dainties. I wished the music, though beginning softly, to rise to the full blare of the fanfare.

His cross, he continued, was his singular beauty, at once masculine and delicate, which sometimes disgusted him because ugliness would have allowed him to test the strength of his soul and the power of his intellect. But then, since he could not destroy it, he decided that it was beautiful to be beautiful and to subject his beauty to the whole audacious game of life.

The rumours that circulated about him - whether true or false - were worthy of the character. When he travelled by sleeping-car he reserved the entire carriage. His tips were never less than fifty or sixty lire. He owned four motorcars. One dinner had cost him twenty-five thousand lire, and after a party he organised, three ladies of the highest Roman aristocracy had received gifts worth eighty thousand lire. His chief mania, however, whenever he was accompanied by a woman who expressed a desire, appeared to be entering the most elegant shops and buying every example of the article that had interested her.

His downfall - within a few days of the arrest, creditors had submitted claims exceeding seven million lire - found its exploiters. 'Today,' proclaimed banners outside a cinema on 17 May, 'an exceptional revival of Lulu, starring Tilde Teldi, Cortese's beautiful and pale friend.' On that same day Italian infantry were assaulting Vodice and Monte Santo: the Tenth Battle of the Isonzo had begun seventy-two hours earlier. Within twenty days, one hundred thousand wounded men would have had ample time to read in newspapers and magazines of Count Luca Cortese's fabulous adventures and to reflect upon the fact that the State paid them fifty centesimi a day for the privilege of offering their lives to the fatherland.

Women's contribution to the war effort had grown as the shortage of men became apparent. Two hundred thousand women were already working in war industries, while hundreds of thousands more had replaced men in other occupations and even in military districts, as clerks, typists and archivists. Their entry into employment had met with some hostility from the stronger sex: in Rome, for example, the employment of women tram conductors had provoked a strike at the beginning of 1917. Employers could easily demonstrate, however, that the labour registers were entirely empty and that, if production was to continue and increase, the only great reserve of labour was female. Wages were very modest: the youngest women workers rarely earned more than two lire a day, while the average lay between three and four lire. Yet the income was often an unexpected addition to the family budget, and a craze arose for going to work in the 'munitions'.

The feeling of possessing for the first time a life independent of and outside the family, the possibility of escaping male guardianship, and the impression of contributing indirectly to the war all encouraged women to undertake men's work. Venetian peasant women turned factory workers cynically concluded that in peacetime men took the money and they took the beatings, while now the men took the beatings and they took the money. The female army of labour did not, however, make the trades more refined. The citizens of Milan complained that women tram conductors had quickly acquired the rude manners of their male colleagues.

There remained broad sectors in which male labour was irreplaceable, partly because women generally lacked specialised skills and could not be assigned at will. But a man of military age who wished to work in a factory had to obtain exemption, and no privilege lent itself more naturally to arbitrariness and injustice. Soldiers, especially the peasants among whom exemptions were inevitably very rare, regarded with suspicion the robust young man who, because he was classified as a turner and declared indispensable, fought the war in a workshop, risking far less and earning far more.

Propaganda was conducted both at home and among the fighting units to explain that a well-trained worker was more usefully employed at a machine than in the front line; that the Supreme Command and the Ministry of War were doing everything possible to sift out the 'shirkers', reduce exemptions to a

minimum and, where possible, introduce mutilated men into factories after courses of technical education and retraining. Yet there were always too many factory owners and fathers of families ready to place their law-graduate sons on the list of skilled workers indispensable to them. A man with influence in high places could even displace an exempted worker and send him to the front in his stead, although he lacked the ability to replace him in the factory.

The plague of hiding from service, whose elimination would have required the complete personal cooperation of the entire population, could therefore never be abolished, in Italy or elsewhere, and remained a perpetual source of protest and disgust. Mocking verses circulated with the laudable purpose of shaming those who fraudulently avoided their duty:

> You're no good for being a soldier,
> ... you're no good for serving the King,
> and you're no use to me either!

But since love of one's own skin normally prevailed over love of one's sweetheart, the rejected man - or the shirker - replied:

> Farewell, my beauty, farewell!
> The army is going away,
> but I am not leaving;
> I am staying here instead.

All the more so because men rejected for service - rightly or wrongly - and shirkers of every kind, no longer having to compete for women with so many fine young fellows exiled to the front, were automatically placed at an advantage, as Signor Capanna sang with sadistic delight, his eyes gleaming behind his dark spectacles:

> Now so many young fellows have gone away,
> and these little women don't know whom to cling to.
> Poor us, already past our prime,
> we'll have to unravel so many skeins.
> We've got so many around us,
> both by night and by day;
> this morning alone
> thirty have already asked us for love.

For combatants sent home on brief leave, seeing this spectacle was like eating dynamite.

The financial cost of the war had exceeded every pessimistic forecast. Before the conflict, the annual budget of the Italian armed forces had never exceeded half a billion lire, and even that effort had always seemed burdensome. In April 1915, when eight months of fighting on the other fronts already offered some indication of what might be expected, Giovanni Giolitti, the gloomiest of prophets, told Olindo Malagodi, editor of the Rome newspaper La Tribuna, that even a successful war would cost six or seven billion lire and bring the country to bankruptcy. Yet in the first twenty months of war, direct military expenditure alone had exceeded fifteen billion; and at the beginning of 1917 it was moving towards an average of one and a half billion a month - one and a half lire per inhabitant per day. Since in the years immediately before the war daily income per inhabitant had been about one lira and twenty centesimi, the whole Italian national income, even if devoted entirely to military expenditure and all essential needs of the civilian population ignored, would not have been sufficient to cover it.

With taxes raised to the utmost possible limit, the State had only two means left to finance the war: credit and the issue of paper money. This old swindling device, by which governments have often attempted to erase their debts to honest and generous subjects, was used only moderately in view of the

circumstances. The money supply in 1917 had merely doubled from its 1914 level, rising from four to eight billion lire. Most financing had therefore been secured through credit operations, especially the issue of war loans. The fourth loan was launched on 6 February 1917, and a considerable propaganda campaign was conducted to induce citizens to subscribe. Trilussa too was mobilised for the occasion and composed verses that were widely circulated:

> Who would have thought, between ourselves,
> that a ramshackle country such as this
> would so quickly bring into the world
> a warrior King and a nation of heroes.
> ...
> Since my boy became a soldier
> he often writes to me: give every penny
> to Cadorna, who sharpens our weapons;
> take it to the bank and lend it to the State.
> Without money, since history began,
> no country ever sang of victory.
> Every lira passing over the counter
> may save the life of a brother;
> every lira you bring is reflected
> upon the blades of the bayonets.

The success of the loan, repeatedly extended, was nevertheless mediocre: three billion six hundred million lire, of which two billion three hundred million came from conversions of earlier loans. Those loans - the first two issued in 1915 and the third in 1916 - had already produced five billion. The bottom of the country's capital resources was now being reached. Nor could the Allies, burdened by their own needs, offer substantial help; in any case, they owed us nothing, since the Salandra government had negotiated no financial clause with them when Italy entered the war.

The United Kingdom granted us a first loan of twenty-five million pounds sterling, about one billion lire, but real relief arrived when the United States entered the war. The American people had truly earned the message that D'Annunzio hastened to dictate to the Associated Press:

> Today, for the soul of Italy, in the Capitol of Washington, transformed into an exalted place of light like the Roman citadel, a garland flowers upon the bust dedicated to the hero whom free men call by the glorious name Knight of Humanity... The great people of the starry flag, rising to its feet to defend the eternal spirit of man, today immeasurably enlarges this sum of beauty opposed to the fury and thunder of barbarism.

It would still take time for the military and economic contribution of the United States to exert its decisive weight in favour of the Entente, but the financial contribution was immediate. An initial credit of half a billion lire was opened for Italy at the beginning of May, and another twenty billion would be added before the end of hostilities. Italy's war was won with Italian blood, but twenty per cent of it was won with American money. One fifth of the total may seem a modest fraction, but it must not be forgotten that the Entente's victory in 1918 was a narrow one. That fifth was therefore the difference separating us from defeat. From this point of view, and from this alone, it is right to say that the intervention of the United States of America - which sent only one regiment to our front - was decisive for Italy as well.

The money scraped together by every means at the government's disposal did not evaporate entirely. Part paid for imports, part paid the soldiers themselves - although their ten-day allowance represented only two per cent of total expenditure - and the rest bounced back into the pockets of the population. The principal feature of this circulation was that those who pocketed the money generally did not

coincide with those who paid it, because funds collected capillary fashion flooded certain categories while leaving others dry.

The peasant whose sons were at the front, who had been forced to gather less experienced helpers and who might also have contributed to the war loans did not normally receive the proper share due to him in return, for example through higher agricultural prices. Nor could he expect to recover everything he had given, since a portion inevitably disappeared. A worker who had managed through wage increases to preserve his purchasing power - and there were not many - was unknowingly a small profiteer, since he had not suffered the share of lost income borne by the nation on average. If, having no sons, he had managed to place his daughters in industry, he profited more substantially, because he occupied jobs that would otherwise not have existed.

As one climbed the social scale, the number of profiteers diminished while the size of each individual's profit increased. In only a few years, medium-sized firms such as Fiat and Ansaldo had swollen to meet the ever-growing requirements of the army and navy. The government later exercised its power to strike excessive incomes by taxing so-called war super-profits more severely; but Luigi Einaudi warned that it would have been better to avoid this cutting back by making more advantageous contracts at the outset.

While Socialist eyes were fixed on the profits of the great industries and the major 'sharks' - profits that were in large measure inevitable - other, far more concealed and legally unassailable forms of profiteering brought enormous advantages to a narrow class of small industrialists and merchants. This category did not include those who sold flour and bran mixed with sawdust, made forged sugar ration cards or supplied the military administration with boots having cardboard soles. They were criminals who broke the law and, if discovered, were prosecuted automatically. Nor did it include those who offered on the market, at higher prices or in poorer quality, goods formerly imported from Germany whose stocks had run out, such as the 'national fountain pen' or para-dioxy-meta-diamino-arsenobenzene, more commonly known as Salvarsan, an effective anti-syphilitic preparation which the Zambelletti company, 'a benefactor of Italian culture and chemical industry', had succeeded in reconstructing by penetrating the jealous secrecy in which its German inventors had wrapped the formula in 1911.

It was rather a question of people who took advantage of the absence of particular products to offer substitutes of doubtful and often abominable quality. Was coffee unavailable? Mokar was ready, made from 'the choicest ingredients'. Was butter scarce? There was no cause for fear: Chierichetti & Torriani offered 'butyrine', an 'excellent artificial butter, recommended because it is pure and eminently hygienic'. 'Gas costs less for those who use the Gassolite mesh on their cookers (price L. 2.75). Four lire are saved on every ten lire of gas. On sale from the company: The Gassolite.' As can be seen, the English label had replaced the German one, fashionable before the war but now unpatriotic. Against vermin, the scourge of soldiers, Cavalier P. Colombo offered the 'Indian Destroyer', a 'very fine, penetrating and deadly powder'.

Equally effective - for the vendors' pockets - were products that increased the heating power of fuel at little cost. 'Householders welcomed with relief the news that Fox-Caleur, an English product of worldwide fame, was being introduced into Italy as well (retail: one dose for 250 kg of coal, L. 3.75; for industrialists and large consumers: one dose for 5,000 kg, L. 45).' The virtues of Fox-Caleur and the scientific explanation of the apparent miracle were contained in the descriptive pamphlet: 'It is a chemical composition which, dissolved in water and poured over coal - or even wood - increases its heating power by fifty per cent. This is explained by the fact that during combustion the substance covers the surface of the fuel with metalloids, which become incandescent and, while doubling the calories, protect the fuel, which consequently takes twice as long to burn.'

There were other versions of the explanation. By seasoning the coal with the miraculous powder, 'a gas is developed and concentrated which doubles the calories, thereby producing a saving of fifty per cent'. Fox-Caleur possessed other advantages: it was not explosive, it was not dangerous and it was not 'combustible'. Potential customers were warned against the numerous counterfeits already deplored as a consequence of its lightning success, as demonstrated by a letter from the Bologna purchasing office asking for a second consignment 'following the favourable outcome of the first experiment'.

It did not take long for people ignorant of chemistry but not lacking common sense to realise that this and similar products were poorly disguised frauds. By then, however, the trick had been accomplished, and their inventors moved on to another product, stirring in the mortars of some cellar extremely cheap raw materials that were completely harmless and equally useless. One example was 'lichenine with creosote and mint (Aegri sunt sani - a true triumph of Italian therapy in the struggle against TB, consumption and tuberculosis, cured in a few days).' The game played upon good faith and naivety continued at full sail so long as the state of war made official supervision inefficient and inadequate, burdened as the authorities were by far more serious concerns.

One activity only weakly connected with the war, but powerfully stimulated by it, was the cinema, then in its early adolescence. In the period immediately before the conflict, the Italian film industry had dominated the markets, and only recently had competition from Hollywood begun to be felt.

The excess purchasing power concentrated among the proletarian masses of the large cities, which found no outlet in other, more perverse and far more expensive amusements reserved for the wealthier classes, was dissipated largely in cinemas. These establishments, still relatively few in number, overflowed with people bearing many different smells. Powerful ventilators, a recent marvel of the electromechanical industry, mixed these odours with cigarette and cigar smoke and distributed them evenly throughout the auditorium, together with a certain number of cases of pneumonia. Cinema attendance statistics are genuinely impressive: in Milan alone, whose population at the time was below seven hundred thousand, one and a half million tickets were sold during March 1917. The mania for entering the cinema was so widespread and deeply felt that, even in such troubled times, a certain Gennaro Vollaro of Sparanise succeeded in defrauding about a hundred young women with the prospect of a rapid and brilliant career.

The favourite actresses - the stars of the age - were Pina Menichelli, Francesca Bertini, Lyda Borelli, whom Luca Cortese, as a connoisseur, had offered two million lire to refrain from acting in films, Lyda's sister Alda Borelli, Giorgina Del Frasso Dentice and Lina Millefleurs. The favourite subjects were taken from novels and stories by fashionable authors, D'Annunzio first of all, followed by Marco Praga, Fogazzaro and Lucio D'Ambra, the pseudonym of Renato Manganella; foreign writers such as Victorien Sardou were not neglected.

Film production followed at a rapid pace in the Turin studios: The Virgin of the Sea; Beyond Life, Beyond Death; Fedora; Malombra; The Mad Mother; Andreina; The Slave of Phidias; The Crusade of the Innocents; A Stormy Night; and a hundred others. Their plots were devised to satisfy tastes that were still primitive. There was The Fatal Woman, who, 'after sowing sorrow and misfortune around her, found no refuge except death, the supreme and inviolable guest'. In The Marauder of the Air, the engineer Carlo, an aircraft designer, invents a new engine. His sister, in league with a count who is her lover, steals the secret of the invention. Once the work is complete, the engineer is declared insane following the count's accusation. 'Carlo's escape gives rise to varied and exciting adventures in which the aeroplane of vengeance appears.' Montmartre, by contrast, described the idyll between a model and a young musician swept into the whirlpool of seduction, 'ending with the young woman's repentance; like a weary swallow she returns to her nest, there to die'.

Not all the stories were so gloomy. There were Italian comedians, while the farces of Max Linder and Charlie Chaplin were arriving from the United States. Other subjects favoured mystery, anticipating the detective films of the future. In this genre, extremely long films were fashionable, shown in instalments of about two hours over the course of a full month. One example was The Mask with the White Teeth, in eighteen episodes, only the last of which supplied the key to the mystery. The film enjoyed great success, and when relations between the Italian government and Wilson began to deteriorate after the war, the epithet 'the mask with the white teeth' was bestowed upon the President of the United States.

It had already become clear, however, that cinema was not only an effective narcotic but also a powerful instrument of propaganda. Colautti's The Eagle depicted the expulsion of the Austrians from Lombardy-Venetia, with the performance accompanied by choruses and bands. Maciste the Alpino put his muscles to work against our age-old enemy and, after donning uniform, 'performed arduous and insane feats'. Among foreign 'films' - the word was then feminine in Italian - propaganda productions formed the majority, such as The Heroism of a Frenchwoman and The Invasion of the USA, a colossal work of American interventionist propaganda during neutrality. 'The impressive spectacle, in which every monstrous machine of war is set in motion by anonymous assailants - easily identifiable, however, with the dreaded Teutons - with New York in flames and the flight and slaughter of the defenceless, constituted a thoroughgoing battle against pacifism.'

The film He Knew How to Die and Was Redeemed was instead directed against domestic pacifism. In it, a young neutralist and reader of Avanti! curses the war, cheers Austria and acts as a spy, but later repents, fights and dies.

The military documentary was also spreading. France sent us The Capture of Monastir and The Battle of Verdun. Britain sent the three-part series England Is Ready and many others, including Triumphant Tanks, which showed the first use of tanks during the Battle of the Somme in the autumn of 1916. Italy too had produced several documentaries, such as The Magnificent Work of Our Navy, Wartime Mail and The War on the Adamello. The last was widely distributed abroad, was seen by the British royal family and was shown in Russia during the first months of the Revolution.

From May 1917, however, the Supreme Command prohibited all unauthorised filming and established an Army film section, which distributed 'cinema communiques'. One of the first showed 'Cadorna in the trenches of the Karst, his head protected by a helmet'; another was devoted to 'Our Gallant Territorial'. Military film sections were theoretically entrusted to experienced and daring officers, and it was said that some had been wounded while filming scenes of combat. Those who had occasion to see these documentaries nevertheless found them rather ramshackle compared with the French and British productions. Others complained that the view of the battle lines was obscured by close-ups of important bigwigs, who were eager to be admired by audiences in their role as actors in the cinematographic war.

The third year of war found Italy economically exhausted and deeply discouraged - neither more nor less so than the other belligerent countries. As Cyril Falls writes in his History of the First World War:

> In a few large cities, especially the capitals, a feverish gaiety was visible. Nightclubs were a source of concern and anxiety to the police. Although the theatre remained popular, taste turned towards light entertainment and displays of legs. In London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna and Petrograd too, most of the population led a sober and desolate life, but a minority, including many men in uniform, drank, feasted, danced and went to whores.

In Italy this minority, which was not representative but set the tone, could be seen in Turin, Milan and Genoa - those three provinces alone supplied sixty per cent of the tax on war super-profits - in Rome, where administrative centralisation favoured corruption, and, for more understandable reasons, in cities immediately behind the front such as Udine and Verona.

This end-of-the-world state of mind, natural among troops rotating out of the line and eager to live quickly, had spread to those enriched by the war, as though they too sensed that easy money could not be retained for long and was therefore worth spending as if it burned their hands. Outside those few centres, however, in smaller towns and country villages, there was no trace of frivolous life, only sadness.

There were 125,000 workers employed in the war industries concentrated in Turin, although proportionately fewer men had been called up there. Milan was quieter, and 1 May 1917 passed without incident apart from some shouting and the distribution of the usual anonymous leaflets, attributed to anarchists, who were regularly sent to prison on the most solemn occasions. The Lombard plain, and in general the regions where Catholic organisations were strongest, showed some signs of restlessness, while the South was completely calm, the only form of passive resistance being failure to report for conscription or desertion.

The connection between the war zone and the interior of the country was loose in every respect. A distant echo of the fighting reached Verona, Vicenza and Udine in the thunder of heavy guns. Air raids - on a very modest scale - hung as a threat over the whole Veneto, a few Lombard provinces and the Adriatic coastal strip as far as Brindisi and Bari. Psychologically, the connection was even more defective, and the civil authorities did little to integrate the nation with the army. Severely mutilated officers were even forbidden to wear uniform, almost as though they ought to be ashamed of their wounds. The matter prompted a parliamentary question, to which the Minister of War, General Morrone, gave this surprising reply:

> The prohibition - limited, however, to officers suffering from injuries that required supports or appliances - was imposed throughout the country at a time when the public, not yet having steeled itself to the sight of the harsh but glorious fate of our most seriously wounded men, was inclined to make them the object of comments inspired by pity or commiseration. The Ministry has now already issued instructions for an appropriate relaxation of the rule.

Nor did the country show greater solidarity or understanding towards the refugees from the Veneto, from the Val d'Astico, and the exiles from the Julian territories who had been gathered into concentration camps in Tuscany and Campania. They lived miserably there, receiving a meagre government allowance and some assistance from British and American charitable committees. Yet the local population looked at them with hostility, called them 'Austrians' and accused them of driving up the prices of basic necessities. Several of the young women in the camps escaped and turned to prostitution; once recaptured, they were sent under compulsory residence to Ponza, there to become completely brutalised.

The enthusiasm that in May 1915 had animated an interventionist minority and had swept along and moved a doubtful but emotional majority had finally disappeared. Everyone now attended to his own affairs. Among the marriage advertisements one could read, without causing any scandal:

> Handsome thirty-seven-year-old gentleman, tall and healthy, fortune of one million, also proprietor of an industrial firm, exempt from military service, would marry an extremely beautiful, tall, educated and good young lady.

The ruling class continued to provide the army with a considerable number of brave men. Senator Mazzoni, the distinguished Latinist, whose son was an Alpini officer held prisoner in Austria, had enlisted and was serving as a captain. Vincenzo, a son of the Honourable Nitti, was on the Karst as an officer cadet; Ardengo Soffici had been seriously wounded, as had Benito Mussolini, while Captain Ferruccio Parri, already decorated several times, received the French Croix de Guerre. The two young Counts Casati were both mobilised, and the son of the Honourable Pipitane fell gloriously in the Tenth

Battle of the Isonzo. Marinetti had volunteered and was a lieutenant in the trench-mortar arm. Professor Cesare De Lollis, who had been jeered by students as a neutralist during Italy's nine months of neutrality, and in whose defence Benedetto Croce himself had intervened, volunteered at the age of fifty-three and was promoted to captain for merit in war. All the sons of the industrialist and deputy Crespi were in the front line; in June 1917 the industrialist Cerasola lost a second son, after losing the first in the Battle of Gorizia.

But the question 'Why the war?' was by then insinuating itself even into the minds of the least doubtful, and it was difficult to answer. The nation was divided; Parliament and the Government were divided, even though this was a government of national union. Those - and they were the majority - who had allowed themselves to be carried on the crest of the wave had had ample time to think again and were looking for an alibi. The parties that during neutrality had called themselves 'interventionist' continued, out of spite, to use the name, as though in the middle of a war the word had not acquired an anachronistic meaning.

The Liberal Association thundered that the Government must prevent the official Socialists from holding their congress in Rome, 'from which the greatest impulse towards the war of national vindication had gone forth'. Dissolving the Socialist Party and suppressing publication of Avanti! seemed a very simple remedy against defeatism. The Socialists, for their part, did not lift a finger to seek a way out; they were content and satisfied to feel innocent and watched with pleasure as the situation became ever more deeply bogged down.

The Government was equally disoriented and did not know which way to turn. One minister, Sonnino, conducted his foreign policy independently of the views of his colleagues - Bissolati, for example - who by no means agreed with him. At Supreme Command, as was natural, the solution was awaited on the military plane: the great Victory that would put everything right. No one liked to think about the post-war period and the three million brutalised veterans who would have to be found a place in society; the thought was enough to make one's hair stand on end. Relations with the Allies were scarcely warm. Over everything hung the spectre of economic bankruptcy. A kind of fatalism was taking possession of humble and powerful alike.

Yet the war still lay at the heart of all Italy. An invisible bond of affection and passion stretched between the two million men of the mobilised army and the rest of the country. A million casualties had already marked as many families with mourning and grief. Twice that number lived in anxiety and trepidation, trembling if no news arrived and trembling at the thought that it might. When the great offensives began, proclaimed by the communiques and glorified by the newspapers, an indefinite period of torture began in many homes. Then, unexpectedly and suddenly, there would come a free military postcard without a signature and with a few scrawled words: 'Still going strong.' That was enough for the ordeal to begin again from zero.

Not everyone was so fortunate. Some received a letter written in an unfamiliar hand. The terror of opening it was then superimposed upon the anxiety of knowing. It was the captain who wrote:

> Madam, it is my painful duty to inform you that Private A. B. was killed in action. He performed his duty towards his country with courage and self-sacrifice, setting his comrades a constant example of devotion and bravery.

Of the husband or son there remained only the memory, and perhaps a cross in a war cemetery, unless a shell had pulverised the body.

How many identical letters had the captain been obliged to write? Who would write one for him?

CHAPTER THREE

How the Army Fought

On 3 January 1917 it was announced that the first major inter-Allied war council would meet in Rome within three days. The leading personalities immediately converged on the Italian capital in special trains: Lloyd George, accompanied by Lord Milner, General Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, and General Wilson; the French Prime Minister Briand with General Lyautey, then Minister of War; General Galitzin for the Tsar's government; and, on the Italian side, Boselli, Sonnino, Scialoja, Bissolati and Generals Cadorna and Dall'Olio. General Milne and the bristling Sarrail were also summoned from the Salonika front, together with many others.

The doors closed behind the delegates, who secluded themselves in large rooms to discuss the problems of the war, while journalists were left to imagine the lofty subjects on the agenda. The meeting appeared so important that even Achille Beltrame immortalised it in an illustration for the Domenica del Corriere, although the faces were so characterless that only Boselli could be recognised by his great white beard. The most original comment came from Avanti!, which attacked Leonida Bissolati for attending in top hat and morning coat, as good manners required, instead of appearing, as the etiquette of the proletarian party to which Bissolati had once belonged supposedly demanded, without a tie and in a tattered shirt.

With a speed that seemed almost excessive, the inter-Allied conference was dissolved after a day and a half and seven or eight hours of meetings. The Italian Government offered a farewell luncheon - tasty but sober, as wartime economy required - at the Hotel Excelsior in Via Veneto. It was a fine day, and Rome's mild winter sunshine filled the guests with an appearance of euphoria. The sprightly Boselli, remembering that he was the meritorious president of the Dante Alighieri Society, could not resist the temptation to propose a toast, saluting 'in the name of Italy, from fateful Rome, with certain confidence, final and complete victory'. Other toasts answered his: to France, to the Tsar, to the King of Italy, the King of England and invaded Belgium. Then the party scattered like a firework, each man disappearing in his own direction.

For the general public, what had been decided in Rome was a mystery and would remain so for a long time. Judging from the tone of the official communiques, vague though they were, there was every reason to feel calm and confident. What purpose could the meeting have had other than to discuss the best methods of defeating the Central Powers? Those methods had been identified and would be put into effect. Had an invisible microphone amplified and broadcast the delegates' words without their knowledge, however, it would have been rather disappointing to discover that there was no recipe for defeating the Germans, and that the uncertain and nebulous ideas of the supreme leaders did not even agree with one another.

The Rome meeting had been desired by David Lloyd George, who had become His Britannic Majesty's Prime Minister on 7 December 1916 after torpedoing the Asquith Cabinet, in which he himself had served as Minister of War. His purpose was, for the first time and from a position of strength, to call into question the strategic directives of the High Commands. He was troubled by the suspicion that, if the political authorities approved them, they would become nothing more than the legitimation of future and inevitable disasters.

Lloyd George had a very poor opinion of the military caste. His judgement of the British generals, particularly Robertson and Field Marshal Douglas Haig, Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force in France, was even more unfavourable. Haig, with his handsome, expressionless

and impassive face and a difficulty in speaking that bordered on stammering, aroused in the fiery Welshman, whose eloquence was fluent and verbose, an instinctive repugnance combined with the suspicion that Haig and his entire General Staff were little short of maniacs. The Prime Minister arrived in Rome with a plan carefully guarded from indiscreet eyes - which were not those of the Germans - hoping to find supporters in the Italian Cabinet and High Command, which had been warned of the proposal in general terms, for the project of transferring the main weight of military operations in 1917 to the Italian front against Austria.

It was a revolutionary position. It undermined the principle that military plans must not be criticised or discussed by 'incompetent' civilians. Until then, in the three Western democracies, the most complete separation of powers had prevailed between political and military authority. The soldiers had the duty to win the war, or at least to fight the battles; the civilians had the thankless task of satisfying the Staffs' growing demands. If ammunition was needed, ammunition must be provided. If artillery pieces were lacking, more must be built. If men were short, the government had to call up further age groups, comb through those exempted or send men already declared unfit for a new medical examination, in order to replenish the stocks of 'cannon fodder'. They had another no less disagreeable duty: to defend the General Staff's conduct in Parliament and silence the criticisms of politicians who discussed grand strategy with the competence of self-taught men whose learning had been badly digested. This had happened in Britain with Lord Kitchener [2], in France with Joffre and in Italy with Cadorna.

For some time, however, opinion had been turning. Some said that Lord Kitchener's tragic, though glorious, end in the northern ocean had spared him a melancholy decline, for he had begun to be regarded not as an infallible god but as a limited figure, both as a commander and as an organiser - little short of a bungler. In France, the apotheosis of Verdun had not obscured the fact that the initial reverse had largely been Joffre's responsibility. His haughty letter of 18 December 1915 to Gallieni, the Minister of War, in which he denied that any danger threatened the Verdun basin and vehemently protested against the Government's questions and requests for information as signs of distrust in him, had been circulated in parliamentary circles and, once the danger had passed, severely criticised. The torpedo struck on 13 December 1916. In Briand's words: 'I shall stick a marshal's baton down his throat...' Joffre was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the French armies in every theatre of war - in cruder language, he was removed from command. The rank of Marshal of France was thrust 'down his throat' on 26 December to pension him off and silence him. In his place came General Nivelle, who had recently made his reputation by organising the recapture of Fort Douaumont. He boasted that he possessed a special method for annihilating the Germans and was given command of the French armies of the North and North-East - in other words, the French army in France.

In Italy, the Austrian offensive of May 1916 had produced the dilemma: either Cadorna must go or Salandra must go. It was the Government that resigned. This was due only in part to the weaker authority of civilian government in Italy, and far more to Cadorna's personality, which, however indigestible to many members of Parliament, towered above those of his French and British colleagues.

Although 1916 had witnessed the fall of many deities, Lloyd George's proposal was revolutionary all the same, because it reopened decisions that the military chiefs had agreed little more than a month earlier. The strategy the Allies were to follow jointly in 1917 had been discussed at French Supreme Headquarters at Chantilly the previous November. On the fifteenth, Joffre, Haig, Robertson, Cadorna and other representatives of the belligerent nations had assembled there. The 'civilians' - Asquith, Lloyd George, Briand and Izvolsky - arrived twenty-four hours late and found the plans already approved. In 1917 the Allied armies would repeat, with greater violence, the strategy of 1916: 450 divisions, the

equivalent of ten million soldiers, were to hurl themselves against the Central Powers' 370 divisions and fight on every front for as long as possible, so as to 'wear out' the enemy.

In the opinion of the General Staffs, the December earthquake - Joffre's replacement and Lloyd George's rise to power - was not to alter the Chantilly decisions. At this point, however, Lloyd George's 'Eastern' view made itself felt. Russia, he believed, could not choose its theatre of operations because of its geographical isolation. France and Italy - one invaded, the other obliged to justify to itself its intervention in the war - had to exert their main effort on national territory. The British Empire, however, which had by then mobilised one hundred divisions and commanded the sea, possessed much greater freedom of choice. Opposed to the 'Westerners', who insistently demanded that every man, every gun and every aeroplane be sent to France to 'wear out' the Germans, were the 'Easterners', who wished to seek the enemy coalition's weak flank elsewhere.

Here, however, opinions became confused. Some wanted to intensify the attack on Turkey and threaten it not only in Palestine and Mesopotamia but also in the Gulf of Alexandretta, where General Smuts proposed landing ten divisions - but where were the necessary transports to be found? Others, to whom Turkey seemed too peripheral a starting point for the march on Berlin, proposed reinforcing the Salonika front - 'our largest concentration camp', as the Germans called it - in order to threaten Bulgaria and, more vaguely, Austria. Finally there were those, including the British Prime Minister, who believed that a direct threat from the Italian front against Germany's largest ally offered the greatest probability of success.

Lloyd George had taken the train to Rome, brooding silently on his concerns and giving his generals yet another demonstration of the distrust with which he surrounded them. He had not said a word about the plan he intended to propose to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, who accompanied him throughout the thirty-hour journey. Consequently, when discussion opened in Rome on the memorandum summarising the Prime Minister's ideas, the coldest and most detached men were the British soldiers themselves.

> Lloyd George - General Wilson writes in his diary - showed what he was made of by reading a memorandum on strategy concerning Romania, Salonika and the Italian front, an astonishing document drafted without Robertson having so much as read it, let alone approved it.

'Robertson,' Wilson continues, 'is very annoyed.' Robertson was in fact furious and, although he did not bat an eyelid, behaved as though afraid to touch the document for fear of burning himself. He left the conference before the others, convinced that his Prime Minister would come to nothing. The French representatives were also hostile to the project, since they believed they had discovered in Nivelle the inventor of a new method for defeating the Germans. Briand was not entirely certain of this, however, and was more led than leader.

In his memorandum, after praising the Italian soldier, Lloyd George emphasised that the successes so far achieved against Austria were also due to the Austro-Hungarian army's weaker power of resistance and to the divisions of race and interest that made it a less difficult obstacle than the German army. The Governments and General Staffs were therefore invited to study the best means of providing Franco-British cooperation on the Italian front.

The idea of combined action on our front had also germinated spontaneously in Cadorna's mind. It was certainly more natural for him, since his 'West' extended only as far as the Stelvio. But the first mention of it in a letter to Robertson had produced a brusque refusal. Cadorna therefore knew that the subject was taboo for his British colleague. Nevertheless, the proposal Lloyd George was to champion had been discussed in the Council of Ministers a few days before the Rome meeting. Even the maximum limits of

the offer were not well known: perhaps four hundred heavy guns, perhaps about ten divisions, perhaps both together. Yet an initial obstacle had arisen all the same, for Sonnino, without even explaining his reasons, had shown firm opposition to the idea of British support. When pressed, he continued to prevaricate, saying that the French and British would send only the dregs of their troops to our front - ragged Congolese or Annamite colonial soldiers. Nor was he alone in thinking so. Giolitti, privately informed of Lloyd George's proposal a few days later, expressed the same negative view, arguing that if we achieved a success with British assistance we would acquire a reputation for being incapable of accomplishing anything by ourselves.

Sonnino's opposition subsided only after Bissolati threatened to resign. Of all the ministers, Bissolati was the most convinced ally of Lloyd George and Cadorna. He had held a private meeting with the Prime Minister on the evening of 6 January and had conscientiously prepared himself for the discussion expected the following morning. But the icy reception given to the memorandum showed him and Cadorna - if they needed further proof - what the British and French soldiers thought.

After Lloyd George had completed his exposition, the conversation continued in a somewhat nebulous tone. What did Cadorna feel able to do with a reinforcement of three hundred medium-calibre guns? To answer, replied our Chief of the General Staff, it would be useful to know when the guns could be sent. By the end of January, the Allied soldiers interjected, on condition that they were returned in April. In April? That allowed only enough time for the outward journey, mechanical adjustment, registration of the guns and the return journey. And what did the French and British imagine - that only three hundred guns stood between the Italian army and Vienna? If Cadorna believed he needed troops, Lloyd George intervened, he should consider the matter calmly and then make his desiderata known. Meanwhile the minutes should record that 'the conference is convinced of the advantages offered by the Italian front for a combined offensive by the three Western Allies'.

They then moved on to another subject: Greece. Should she be threatened with war or not? In the morning they had concluded that nothing should be done. In the afternoon the decision was reversed: Greece would receive an ultimatum and forty-eight hours in which to answer, while the French wished to reinforce the threat by sending further divisions to Salonika. Although the triangle remained the same - Robertson, Lyautey and Cadorna - the resistant side changed direction. Neither Cadorna nor Robertson was willing to send more troops to the Macedonian front. 'If you want them there, send your own.' Cadorna yielded so far as to provide two thousand civilians to repair the road between Monastir and Santi Quaranta. 'But I shall secretly order them to work slowly,' he thought, 'to prevent the Austrians, after retaking Monastir, from descending on Valona along the newly repaired road.'

On these terms the conference broke up and the guests were escorted to the station. Little had been concluded, but the Italian Prime Minister, who perhaps understood less than anyone else, did not hesitate to tell Bissolati emphatically: 'You were the victor.'

Within ten days Cadorna drafted the memorandum Lloyd George had requested. If the intention was merely to reinforce the Italian front so that the enemy could be engaged both on the Isonzo and in the Trentino, four hundred medium-calibre guns would suffice. If, however, a strategic decision aimed at Trieste and Ljubljana was desired, the assistance of no fewer than eight divisions would be required.

Although the Prime Minister had imposed no urgency, it was already too late. Lloyd George had left Rome angry and dejected, not only because of the attitude of the French and British soldiers but also because of the Italians' indecisive conduct; even Cadorna had seemed lukewarm to him. Passing through Paris, he met Nivelle, whom he had never known personally. In the Welshman's eyes, the new French commander-in-chief possessed two admirable qualities: unlike his colleagues, who could utter only a

few words with a dreadful accent, he spoke perfect English, his mother having been Anglo-Saxon; and he was a Protestant. Lloyd George did not greatly care about Nivelle's religion, but Protestantism was an Anglicising qualification. With his customary persuasive speech, General Nivelle allowed Lloyd George to glimpse the possibility of solving at one stroke the hitherto insoluble problem of the Western Front. A Douaumont-type attack had to be organised and multiplied by twenty. Lloyd George, for his part, gave him a free hand. Nivelle, moreover, regarded a combined attack on the Karst as an adventure, 'a strategic error that no commander-in-chief conscious of his responsibilities would ever have accepted'.

The die was therefore cast: for the time being no Allied troops would come to Italy.

Although Lloyd George and Cadorna's combined initiative had not succeeded, the proposal discussed at the Rome conference revealed a change under way in some Allied circles in the assessment of the importance of Italy's contribution to the European war. What had happened on the Western Front in 1915 and 1916 left little hope of bringing Germany to its knees by the only militarily valid means: the destruction of its army. Even the confidence now placed in the 'miracle' promised by Nivelle was more evidence of creeping despair than of a carefully balanced calculation of probabilities.

After the first three frantic months of fighting, which had seen the German advance through Belgium, the outflanking of the French left wing, the recovery on the Marne and the race to the sea, the lines had suddenly hardened like a Siberian river on an autumn night of abrupt frost. From the autumn of 1914 every possibility of manoeuvre had ceased on the Western Front, and the war had become a bloody siege. Nor had the increasingly violent assaults that followed succeeded in breaking into the German front, along which the losses on both sides had reached the fantastic total of seven million men by the end of 1916.

The latest great offensive had been launched on 1 July 1916 by the flower of the British Army astride the Somme. On the very first day, however, the sacrifice of sixty thousand young men - twenty thousand left dead on the ground and forty thousand limping or carried back on stretchers, disfigured and maddened by terror, into their own lines - showed that the hoped-for breakthrough would not be achieved this time either. Yet Sir Douglas Haig had proved stronger than the fear inspired even in the High Commands by the casualty figures, and continued to send his men to slaughter with indifference and absolute faith in God. As Bernard Shaw had said, Sir Douglas was a chivalrous and scrupulous person who gave him the impression that the war would last thirty years and that Haig would conduct it impeccably until retired on reaching the age limit. After four months of convulsive and uncoordinated fighting, after adding another four hundred thousand men to the casualty list, he had moved the front line forward no farther than a family on holiday might walk during a two-hour outing. Rather than a small region, a great cemetery had been conquered.

France, which had been forced to sustain almost alone the great German attack in 1914, had then bled itself copiously in 1915. Joffre had been very lavish with his soldiers' blood and succeeded in consuming 1,400,000 Frenchmen during that year. When coordinated action with the British Army, now fully developed, would have become possible in 1916, the Germans attacked at Verdun, intending to drain away the greater part of French resources on that narrow front. The dispute between 'Westerners' and 'Easterners' was not without foundation.

In this climate it was natural that someone should look towards the Italian army and our front, which until then had been almost forgotten. The French and British had regarded Italy's intervention as their greatest diplomatic success since the beginning of the war, but had immediately lost interest in what happened to us. Moreover, Italy's 'parallel' conduct of the war for more than a year - war on Germany

was declared only on 27 August 1916 - had certainly done nothing to add lustre to our local conflict with the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

In the meantime, however, our army had grown and by the beginning of 1917 was no longer so negligible a force: sixty-four divisions, including sixty strong four-regiment infantry divisions, each comprising twelve battalions. Altogether this was an army equal to thirty-five per cent of the force the Allies had assembled on the Western Front, which consisted of about 170 divisions.

Armament counted even more than men. The army no longer possessed only the fifteen hundred artillery pieces - most of them antiquated - and six hundred machine guns of 1915. Six thousand guns and trench mortars now lined the entire front, and every regiment had at least twenty-four machine guns. Eighty per cent of these forces was deployed along the hundred kilometres from Tolmino to the sea: on average one gun every twenty metres, one machine gun every eight metres and one rifle every ten centimetres. These were figures that no longer made our army look inferior beside those of its powerful allies.

Thanks to the restrictions and sufferings imposed on the population, the Italian army was able to fight: an enormous army, the like of which Italy had never possessed in the past and would never possess again in the future, four times larger than the imperial Roman army at the height of its expansion or than Napoleon's Grande Armee when it attacked Russia. Fifty Italians out of every hundred capable of fighting belonged to it, and at last they had all the weapons they needed to fight and to die.

Every day dozens of trains, loaded with thousands of tons of goods and thousands of men, wound slowly from the farthest parts of the peninsula towards the Veneto and Lombard provinces. Most of them, channelled along the only two existing railway lines - Mestre-Monfalcone and Treviso-Udine - went to feed the Isonzo front. They passed before the Friulian peasants laden with the wealth of the land and industry: guns, machine guns, ammunition, field telephones, coils of barbed wire, food and clothing. At the same time they crossed other trains carrying back towards the interior the product of that wealth: wounded, sick and dead men, prisoners of war and a few unusable weapons wrested from the enemy.

This great army possessed the characteristic defect of the age: immobility. The huge armies, with their overflowing deployment of artillery and small arms and their ammunition depots swelling beyond measure before every offensive, still used men's legs and the hocks of horses and mules as their means of movement in battle. Trains, motor lorries and Decauville narrow-gauge railways served for transport as far as the rear of the front; once fighting began, however, the army had to move, whether forwards or, in the worst event, backwards, by muscular power alone. In either case, moving the equipment and uprooting the war material and communications networks from the places where they had put down deep roots was an almost superhuman undertaking.

On 23 March 1917 Supreme Command issued a lengthy communication on the second winter campaign which described with extreme clarity the degree of immobility the army had reached. Among other things it stated:

> The construction of huts [for troops at rest] alone required the use of more than 300,000 cubic metres of timber and 20,000 tons of various metal materials; iron or wooden bedsteads were installed for about 1,000,000 places, 2,000 stoves were supplied, together with six million square metres of matting, tarred cardboard, insulating felt, Eternit sheets, galvanised sheet metal, and so forth.
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> ... The railway service ... reached a level of activity never attained since the beginning of the war. During the period under consideration, the lines of the Veneto were traversed by approximately 35,000 military trains, in addition to all passenger and goods trains for the public. The transport ... of

> materials ... alone occupied 110,000 railway vehicles. The navigability of certain rivers was improved and ... in October, with normal water levels, the maximum monthly capacity of approximately 50,000 tons was achieved. Through the work of the Army intendancies, the greatest impetus was given to transport by Decauville railways. On the network of a single Army, thirty-eight locomotives and 1,400 wagons normally operated, carrying 144,000 tons of materials in a few months. Motor lorries also continued to be employed on the widest scale. Where road conditions or accumulations of snow prevented carts from passing, extensive use was made of pack trains and still more of sledges. But the safest and quickest means of supply in inaccessible mountain areas or across river outlets was provided by cableways, adopted on a large scale.
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> Such intense transport movement would not have been possible without a road network of a kind no mountain region normally possesses. Hence the need for immense works to build new roads, widen existing ones and strengthen their roadbeds, constructing them where they did not exist.
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> Special attention was given to the supply of drinking water, particularly in the driest areas such as the Asiago Plateau and the Karst. Special installations were therefore built to extract water from the subsoil in the nearest and best-supplied localities, and to raise and convey it by pipelines to the front lines. More than three million litres of water are supplied daily on the Karst in this way. Other aqueducts operate for the Asiago Plateau, one of which has three pumping stations, each with a head of 350 metres. All these installations are powered by electric motors.
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> Among the other services ... special mention should be made of the development given to telegraphic and telephone communications, upon which so much of the army's activity is based. It is enough to recall, for example, that in the zone of one of our Armies there are 5,000 kilometres of telegraph lines, 2,000 of telephone lines and more than 3,000 kilometres of wire for the immediate service of the artillery. Three thousand telephone instruments and two hundred switchboards of varying capacity are in distribution. On average, 10,000 telegrams and telephone messages are sent each day, and at least as many telephone conversations take place.

The report commented:

> History recalls with admiration the small armies - almost a handful of men compared with those of today - that succeeded in crossing the Alps even amid the rigours of the cold season. It offers no example of a mighty army, almost a people in arms, encamped in midwinter throughout the Alpine zone, from the lofty solitudes of the Adamello to the frozen peaks of the Dolomites, the snowy crags of Monte Nero and the arid Karst swept bare by the bora.

These results, of which Supreme Command was so proud, had been achieved at the expense of mobility. What happened in the event of even a modest advance? The construction of roads and railways had to be projected forwards, depots moved and the communications network extended. And in the event of retreat? Who would recover the ten thousand kilometres of telegraph and telephone lines belonging to the Army in question, or the huts, the million beds, the stoves and the water installations mentioned in Supreme Command's communication? Only the motorisation of the fighting troops could have remedied this grave disadvantage. At the time, however, even partial motorisation was inconceivable. Although production had exceeded fifteen hundred lorries a month and the army's vehicle fleet numbered more than twenty thousand, industry was not equipped to produce the far greater quantities of motor vehicles and mechanical tractors required for complete motorisation. The road network could not sustain heavy motor traffic by fighting formations, and above all the technical level was inadequate. Engines were not yet reliable enough for the troops' advance to be entrusted to them. Armoured vehicles were lacking - indeed, they were not even being considered, although tanks were only then being developed secretly in Britain. Ground-attack aviation was insufficient and ineffective. Radio communications, which would have been indispensable for maintaining contact among rapidly moving units, were in their infancy. The

transmitting and receiving sets assigned to army-corps and divisional headquarters were so massive and delicate that they had to be regarded as even more fixed than wired installations.

Through a century of technical progress, the agile armies of the Napoleonic type had been transformed into extremely heavy and cumbersome dinosaurs.

Nor was this true only on land. At sea as well, as the Battle of Jutland had demonstrated - 250 ships with 125,000 men aboard had clashed there - it was practically impossible, without radar and with a relatively primitive communications system, to direct such great forces in the manner required to force a decision.

The transformation of armies from antelopes into pachyderms had, however, taken place rather abruptly. A century of technical progress had not slowly infiltrated tactics but had suddenly assaulted them. The armies that took the field in 1914 were equipped for a war of movement, and the generals were greatly surprised at the end of that year when they realised that the war they had invoked with incantations was turning into an unknown monster. 'But this is not war!' was their first reaction. Unfortunately for the soldiers who fought and died, it was war - and how.

Tactical progress had not kept pace with technological progress. The adoption over the previous fifty years of increasingly efficient and insidious weapons had not shaken the convictions of experts who remained bent over the battles of Cannae and Austerlitz. The Russian General Suvorov's saying, 'The bullet is foolish and the bayonet wise,' was repeated with conviction, although it dated from the eighteenth century. Cadorna too considered it 'indispensable to keep alive faith in the effectiveness of the bayonet'. There had been many illusions concerning cavalry. It was almost an axiom, especially among cavalry officers, that the role of that arm would continue to grow, since 'bullets have little stopping power against a horse'. From these postulates followed certain deadly corollaries: 'morale stands to physical strength as three to one' - numerical inferiority could be compensated by a suitable state of exaltation - and therefore 'the offensive at all costs'. The first application of these sound but insufficiently considered principles to trench warfare was paid for dearly by the fighting men, all the more because, on average, the generals seemed to take a very long time to understand and draw the necessary conclusions.

Before Italy entered the war, Cadorna had deluded himself that we might be spared the trench warfare already established from the North Sea to the Swiss frontier. He had ordered officers to have their swords browned so that they would not glitter in the sun, although within a few days the swords proved useless and cumbersome. In the preface to the Little Manual of Trench Warfare, a handbook sent to him by the French Command and distributed to mobilised units in May 1915, he had written that 'the character of our possible operations, and the nature and configuration of the terrain on which they will take place, make it unlikely that our troops will have to resort to the above procedures, except in unusual circumstances and over rather limited stretches of the front'. Yet a strong doubt must have lodged in his mind, since in directives sent to the Army Commands on the previous 1 April he had referred to 'the possibility that our offensive may encounter stubborn resistance and remain paralysed, as is happening in Flanders and Poland'. Those doubts rapidly became certainty. No front passed more quickly than the Italian front from a war of movement to trench warfare.

This did not mean that trench warfare excluded every possibility of manoeuvre. The concentration of great forces and abundant equipment towards the front lines could offer tempting prey to anyone who broke through the defences. Cadorna explained the problem to Olindo Malagodi on 3 June 1917:

> You understand that after a battle like our last one [the Tenth Battle of the Isonzo], the divisions engaged must be reorganised, ammunition depots replenished, and so forth. This takes time and gives the enemy time to reorganise. If, after delivering the first blow, it were possible to attack again

> with fresh forces only a few days later, the enemy's new and barely sketched-out lines could easily be swept away. By penetrating deeply, one would then obtain a decisive success, routing the enemy army and capturing its heavy artillery and depots. Otherwise one advances only a few paces...

General Capello was fond of a rather obvious slogan: 'Positive success is achieved beyond the enemy's last trench.' Although violent attacks preceded by suitable artillery preparation did not fail to achieve immediate tactical success, the strategic breakthrough remained elusive, because there was always a final enemy trench: the one the adversary had had time to build while the attack laboriously demolished those in front of it.

In nineteen months of war, the Italian army had lost about one million men. Half of them had to be regarded as irrecoverable: dead, prisoners, mutilated men and the seriously ill. Meanwhile its strength had increased enormously. The infantry, Bersaglieri and Alpini battalions, fewer than six hundred on 24 May 1915, numbered about nine hundred in the spring of 1917. Still more impressive was the growth in batteries of artillery pieces or trench mortars, from five hundred to almost two thousand. Machine-gun companies had been created almost from nothing, and the number of those weapons multiplied tenfold. The engineers, aviation and all transport and supply services had expanded correspondingly. The strength of the mobilised army had thus risen to 2,200,000 men, an increase of more than one million. Taking irrecoverable losses into account, almost one and a half million new soldiers had had to be incorporated. In anticipation of the probable losses in the 1917 campaign, another half-million men also had to be prepared and trained.

Until then the demand had been met by incorporating each annual conscription contingent and gradually extending the call-up to older age groups. It could not be expected, however, that the losses of 1917 would be replaced by the class of 1898 alone. During the winter of 1916-17 it therefore became necessary to comb out men sheltering in safe billets, those deferred for further medical examination and personnel employed in unnecessary services. Orders for the 'supply of men' began to rain down as soon as New Year had passed.

On 10 January the classes of 1875 and 1874 - men of about forty-three - were called to the colours for territorial service only, a restriction that afforded little protection since, the previous year, forty-three Territorial battalions had helped to contain the Strafexpedition. The Ministry of War also promised Supreme Command that all dispensations and exemptions would be reviewed by February. Every serviceman born after 1881, whether or not fit for the exertions of war, was required to serve in the war zone. A subsequent circular from the same Ministry sent all men of the 1891 to 1894 classes to training depots even if they were unfit for the exertions of war. From 1 March, exemption was suspended for men serving as drivers unless they belonged to the classes of 1874-77. Also in March, men rejected for a second time were sent back before the conscription boards 'where there was good reason to believe that rejection had been obtained by fraud'.

In April it was the turn of the short men. Even in peacetime the minimum height had been lowered from 155 to 154 centimetres so that the King too could have been incorporated. Now men between 154 and 147 centimetres were summoned for another examination, and those taller than 150 centimetres who belonged to the classes of 1889-98 were declared fit. The very shortest men, humiliated at not having previously been considered capable of fighting, were consoled by the Domenica del Corriere. Asked whether it was better for a soldier to be tall or short, the weekly replied that 'the head or torso is better developed in short men than in tall ones. The mass of the brain is greater in short men, who are also endowed with a quicker intelligence. All this,' the paper continued with a prudent conditional, 'would also have been demonstrated by appropriate scientific experiments.' Whether pleased or displeased to be

'good enough for the King and therefore for the Queen', their turn had come in any case, and they would arrive in time to swell the exhausted legions of the Second Army a few days before Caporetto.

Finally, in June, the entire class of 1899 was called to the colours and, according to the Ministry of War circular, 'the call-up of these recruits does not create any entitlement to discharge for a father serving in the military who belongs to the classes of 1874 and 1875'.

This hypertrophy had diluted and contaminated the army. The enthusiasm of 1915 had become the resignation of 1916 and the impatience of 1917. The war had to be fought and there was no escape - the soldiers said - now that the dance had begun; but no one should demand of them what they could not do. Supreme Command understood this state of mind and therefore made offensives less frequent: in 1917 they were considerably fewer than in previous years. In compensation, however, they grew more violent and involved ever larger numbers of soldiers, so that losses increasingly tended to rise rather than fall. To ensure that no one could play the clever fellow and slip away at the moment of danger, powerful lines of Carabinieri - called 'aeroplanes', in reference to their thankless role as birds of prey - sent back to the trenches and reported to military courts anyone found without justification beyond the guarded line.

The flood of volunteers had also dried up. Most were dead or wounded; those who remained were regarded with suspicion, if not hatred, and pointed out as responsible for having wanted the war - 'this incomprehensible war'. Captain Frescura tells the following story:

> 21 December 1916. A soldier returning from a hospital in Pavia told me that there he had met a war volunteer who showed him a certain friendliness because, disgusted by the isolation in which his comrades left him, the soldier had addressed a few kind words to him.
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> The war volunteer confided in him as follows:
>
> 'You see? The soldiers must regard me as a vagabond, something like those fairground freaks who swallow swords and breathe fire. They call me a war volunteer in the same tone as if they were saying madman, leper or cuckold. Yes, I understand; I understand them. They cannot conceive of an ideal for which a man abandons his possessions, his family and his life. At bottom they are not wrong. An idealist is a man who has driven his sensitivity to extremes - in other words, an abnormal person. To conclude that he is mad is not far-fetched.
>
> 'I gave up profitable work, and so I am mad. Or else I had no work and am a vagabond. I am unnatural because I voluntarily left my family. I voluntarily offer my life, and so I am a fool. No ideal exists unless it is warmed by a flame. Here among the soldiers, however, you may bid farewell to the flame and the ideal. I feel ridiculous and embarrassed, like a gentleman in evening tails who finds himself in a country of naked savages. One cannot fight everyone. I have ended like that gentleman in tails: I am ashamed of it and try to let as few people as possible know. Now the cup is full. My wife, whom I left in America while dreaming of a welcome here with flowers and music like the one I had seen in an illustration in the Domenica del Corriere - my wife, who had not written to me for four months, has now written. Here, listen:'
>
> *Dear husband,*
>
> *There is no point in your writing, because I want nothing to do with an unnatural man. Marry the war and do not bother me any more. As for me, as soon as I am a widow I shall marry someone who is not mad and a scoundrel like you, who abandoned wife and child to go to war. Conduct yourself accordingly and do not bother me again.*
>
> *Your wife, etc.*

'As you see, the dear woman, who still writes “dear husband”, is already certain that I shall not return. Does anyone return from this war? And she insists that I should not “bother” her. Yet, as a precaution - everyone else may die and this scoundrel of a husband may not - as a precaution, I was saying, the letter is not in her own hand. In that way she can always deny it if things go badly for her. The crowning touch is that the censors read it, saw it and allowed it through. Those censors must have had a fine laugh.'

On 15 February 1917, the same Frescura met in the psychiatric ward of a military hospital a colleague, a journalist and former war volunteer, who was pretending to be insane and told him of his 'conversion' from sanity to madness:

Although my conscription class had not been called up, from the very beginning of the war I asked to fight and I did fight, remaining consistent with my ideas and with my conduct as an interventionist. You will probably think that this was already an evident sign of madness. I will agree, if you wish, provided that you agree that it was at least a collective madness and that there ought to be quite a number of us here. Above all, those who shouted loudest and then found themselves a safe little position are missing: the inconsistent ones. Who is madder - I, who was consistent, or they, who were inconsistent? As I was saying, there ought to be many of us here. I also told you that I fought. There is no need to tell you that scientific, mechanical warfare - the war that killed Garibaldian ardour and Latin élan - soon extinguished in me what had above all been Latin élan and flame. Believe me, there is nothing worse than barbed wire for padding and deadening an impulse; and you must agree that a barbed-wire entanglement is not comfortable padding.

Nevertheless, remaining consistent, I went on fighting. In the Trentino and on the Karst, in twenty engagements, I earned two recommendations for medals for military valour. Slowly, by reasoning, deduction and elimination, I reached the conclusion that I must believe in no ideal at all, because war is a tangle of passions, interests, markets, money, careers and ambitions: crime raised to the rank of virtue, the basest passions growing strong in the shadow of a flag. While reason arrives at this terrible conclusion, feeling is pressed, struck and violated every day by a thousand contacts, a thousand acquaintances and a thousand wretched details which, although at first they were only small shadows in the great tricolour picture, rapidly swell and spread over its light and colour.

Then comes the moment when you are ordered to go out on patrol and advance one hundred and fifty metres from the trenches, although you know that the enemy trench is barely thirty metres from ours, and you ask yourself whether the man who gave the order is mad or an idiot. Since the person giving you an order is normally your superior, you will act in a disciplined way if, by respectful exclusion, you conclude that the order itself is mad. If you dare say so aloud, they will reply: 'Since he dares say it, the madman can only be him.' That is how you acquire a reputation. And one day, when you know that you are condemned to the famous waves of men, which must follow one another like the waves of the sea until, by repeatedly breaking against the obstacle, they break it down, you feel an overpowering need to be sincere. With your reputation already established and the truth added to it, your state of madness is officially decreed. And then you end up here.

I ask you whether a man who declares war is not mad, and whether the man who undergoes it is not mad; whether the whole world is mad or only I am. Come, my friend, admit it: you are disturbed and you are asking yourself the same question. When you leave here you will ask it again. The thought will disturb you, and if the disturbance lasts, it will become madness. I hope it does, because I like you and you do not look like a man who will be cheerful in the human waves. You will then enjoy the supreme advantage of saying what you please and, above all, what you think. I, for example, say aloud, as I have already said, that my general is an idiot - an idiot general, in fact, which is more serious. You cannot say it and do not say it. That is the disadvantage of being sane.

Despite the experience of the journalist in the psychiatric ward, it was not so easy to pass for mad; it was much easier to be shot while sane. Yet the episode shows how deeply the volunteers' spirits had already been corroded. At the beginning of the war they had nevertheless come forward by the thousand, not

only from within Italy but from distant continents and from the unredeemed territories, the latter risking the gallows, as the examples of Battisti, Filzi, Nazario Sauro and many others had shown.

It was not true that dying in war was equally easy for everyone. It was extremely easy in the infantry or the Bersaglieri; somewhat less so in the Alpini, who were usually assigned to quieter mountain fronts; and ten times less likely in the artillery or engineers, apart from certain specialities that were battered as badly as, or worse than, the infantry.

The technical complexity of the war had greatly increased the weight of the services and auxiliary arms in comparison with the infantry. General Caviglia recalled:

> In the spring of 1917, IV Army Corps had an effective strength of 114,000 men, of whom 68,000 were combatants and 46,000 non-combatants, most of them unarmed. Moreover, a good third of the combatants were not in the line but belonged to the corps services. Thus the artillery, most of whose men were unarmed, kept at the batteries only the personnel required to serve the guns. Each mountain battery had about sixty men at the battery and two or three hundred behind it to supply ammunition, food and so forth. Taking everything into account, the unarmed outnumbered the armed.

The not quite one million infantrymen therefore felt persecuted, like men damned by God. To be enrolled in the infantry, especially if then sent to the Isonzo front, amounted to a probable death sentence. The Siracusa Brigade, for example, although it was not engaged in exceptionally bloody fighting, lost 883 men out of action between 22 August and 4 September 1917 from a total strength of about 5,000. With roughly the same strength, the Milano Brigade lost 150 officers and 4,300 soldiers between May and October 1917, excluding Caporetto. The 34th Division, composed of the Salerno and Catanzaro Brigades, suffered 4,166 dead and missing and 4,559 wounded on the Karst between 13 and 31 May 1917. From May to September 1917 the Italian army had 400,000 men put out of action, which means that nearly all the divisions engaged fared little better than the 34th Division.

In every municipality in Italy, the great memorial tablets commemorating the brave men who disappeared in the battles of the First World War remain permanent testimony to the slaughter. In the small town of Priverno, then called Piperno and inhabited by only six or seven thousand people, the memorial bears the names of 170 dead. Naturally, the dividing line was not very sharp between those who might lose their lives through an improbable 'piece of bad luck' and those whose survival required a very rare series of 'pieces of good luck'.

'Make way, shirkers!' a patrol returning from reconnaissance would say to those who had stood guard, rifle in hand, along the trench parapets. To them, the men occupying the second lines were shirkers - although not especially well protected, since enemy artillery more often concentrated on them. To all of these together, the field-artillery personnel three hundred metres farther back were shirkers. The field gunners looked over their shoulders with a sigh at the medium-calibre and heavy artillery. To everyone, the members of divisional offices and the personnel of rear-area services were arch-shirkers. Yet even these considered themselves surpassed in privilege by the officers and men at Army headquarters or General Headquarters. All mobilised soldiers were united against the personnel of the military districts outside the war zone, and still more against those at the Ministry of War. The envy of men in uniform was ultimately directed at the genuine shirkers in civilian clothes, the supposedly indispensable exempted workers: men who enjoyed generous pay, continually adjusted to the cost of living, and spent freely on women who always seemed beautiful when viewed through the hungry eye of desire.

The candidates for compulsory suicide could also look around and observe that treatment was more or less inversely proportional to risk. Gasparotto, then an infantry captain, remarked:

> The soldier has formed the curious conviction that, in order to be treated well, one must be anything except a combatant. The infantryman reasons that if one is exempted, one makes money and saves one's skin; if one belongs to an auxiliary arm, one does not fight but finds some way to obtain extra pay. The farrier does not fight, but receives a shoeing allowance; the motor mechanic receives an engine allowance; the telephone operator in an office receives a telephone allowance; the driver receives a motor-vehicle allowance. The combatant alone is allotted one unique and inexorable treatment: fifty centesimi and the risk of his life, day after day.

Trench life had created a new mentality among the combatants. The daily routine, the habituation to death as an event no more frequent than the Black Death in Rome under the Emperor Commodus and therefore accepted as an almost normal risk of existence, certainly made the most ordinary pleasures seem supreme blessings - a good sleep in a bed, a hot meal properly served, decent clothing. Unlike the experience of bloody attacks, however, it did not reach the limit of the unbearable. It had also made brothers of men: peasant soldiers and young junior officers, the sons of the modest urban middle class. Danger had not sharpened personal selfishness; rather, it had developed an affectionate comradeship that prevented men from seeking their own safety at the cost of another's life.

As far as the nature of the ground permitted, the trenches had been brought as close as possible to those of the enemy; at times the distance between them was only a few dozen metres. This was universal practice. Barbed-wire entanglements formed the first defence against a sudden enemy incursion. Fastened to stakes driven into the ground, they could be laid only at night, except on foggy days. When the trenches were too close for any work in the open, coils of wire were simply thrown haphazardly beyond the trench, where they became tangled and merged with the enemy's wire into an inextricable mass that was difficult to cross. After the wire cutters of infamous memory and the tubes of blasting gelatine - the only tools available in 1915 - trench mortars came into wide use for opening gaps. These were true trench artillery pieces, capable of hurling enormous canisters of explosive over a short distance with little accuracy. When one of these barrels exploded it usually caused fearful slaughter. Precisely to reduce such damage, trenches were not built in straight lines but in angular or labyrinthine patterns. Since they had often been captured from the Austrians and followed plans laid out by them, it was not uncommon for an Italian trench to connect directly with the Austrian system. Nor was it rare for soldiers who lost their way to end up in the hands of Habsburg troops - or vice versa.

Anyone sweeping the battlefield with a low, level gaze would scarcely have noticed signs of life. Life proceeded cautiously and silently within the upper skin of the earth's crust. There the human moles ate, drank, slept and died. Crosswise communication trenches started at the third lines, crossed the second and first, and reached the outpost trenches, whose unhappy occupants had the duty - whoever's turn it happened to be - of receiving the first surprise attack and often alerting the defenders with their dying cries. Along these communication trenches, sheltered from enemy fire wherever possible but inevitably exposed at certain points that became compulsory traps where men played hide-and-seek with death, an intense flow of supplies moved towards the most advanced units.

Colonel Angelo Gatti described them:

> A continuous movement of ebb and flow ran through them. The heads of the swallowed-up men could be seen from afar appearing level with the ground, as though walking by themselves; then they suddenly disappeared at the first fall of a shell. Anyone descending into the trenches already felt the slime and the stench of decomposition. Those entrails of the earth, ripped open beneath the blue sky, were terrifying. They smoked continually like the stinking guts of animals freshly slaughtered.
>
> In front of the wire and trench, towards the enemy, the bleak 'no man's land' stretched to the other wire and the other trench. By day the narrow strip was deserted. Grass no longer grew there. If a lost bird crossed it, it did not sing but vanished with a cry of alarm. It grew sadder as the shadow rose,

> alive and terrible, seeming to emerge from the depths and spread little by little through the sky. The distant mountains, the hills, the plain, the ruined villages, the men - all the low things of the earth - radiated that sorrowful darkness.
>
> It was cold. Silence advanced with padded tread and turned everything to stone wherever it passed. Only great flocks of crows continued to circle idly in the air; they drifted a little here and there, then settled on the tops of trees and remained brooding, motionless. No tremor of life stirred in the fields. No gleam of colour laughed upon the water. A broad band of cotton wool enveloped men and things. Where earth merged with sky, beyond the rivers covering themselves in fog, the devastated towns and villages fell asleep. Solitude and despair rested upon the earth. Everyone wanted to stretch out where he stood, utterly exhausted, and finally sleep in peace. Between the wire, the trenches, no man's land and the devastated ground behind the trenches, the nameless multitude of Italy's infantrymen lay pressed to the earth for three and a half years.

No man's land was nevertheless densely populated by the dead of both sides. There the wounded who could no longer rise screamed their inhuman pain until they bled to death, or until gangrene had completely infected them and strangled their gasps. To rush out between the two fires to save a fallen comrade was extremely dangerous; often the best gift was a well-aimed bullet through the skull.

In certain positions that had repeatedly changed hands through attack and counterattack, corpses accumulated in actual layers. As the days and weeks passed, the dead bodies swelled, spreading a foul and unhealthy stench and poisoning the earth and water, which became more dangerous to drink than poison. Alternately exposed to bad weather and sun, first bloated and then calcined, gnawed by the sharp teeth of rats, the corpses assumed the most grotesque and terrifying forms.

These Dantesque holes called trenches, where scraps of food mingled with excrement and water from decomposing corpses, were inhabited by large, fat rats that fed on human flesh and all the refuse of the army. The rats had grown so bold that they tormented even the strongest stomachs; after feeding on fragments of the dead, they did not hesitate to rummage in the mouths of the living. Yet they also provided a certain amusement, since the soldiers could vent their powerless hatred on them. It was not difficult to catch one, tie petrol-soaked rags to its tail, set them alight and release the animal towards the opposing trenches. Sometimes its frantic, terrified run aroused the enemy sentries' suspicions: rifle fire followed, perhaps a burst of machine-gun fire, and multicoloured rockets rose into the sky and fell back, illuminating a rigid desert pockmarked by exploding shells and populated by skulls, shinbones and uniforms clothing skeletons.

Another faithful companion of the fighting man was the louse. When the frenzy caused by bombardment subsided, the savage itching of their bites supplied the sensory accompaniment to every minute of day and night. Statistically, it seemed inevitable that a man would acquire lice after a single day in the trenches. Delousing oneself was therefore not only a pleasant occupation that helped pass the time, but also a necessity. The lice were condemned to death one by one, crushed between the thumbnails or roasted in empty meat tins so that their liveliness in agony might be enjoyed. One variety, as large as bedbugs and bearing a blood-red cross on its back, was cynically called the 'Red Cross ladies'.

In such conditions conversation was reduced to its most elementary form, and relief from the line was the favourite subject from the very first day in position. Women, in their less fully clothed form, were naturally discussed. The rations offered further opportunities to curse life and the war. It was not that the soldiers lacked food in the depots; but the rations stored there and those that reached their destination were two different matters. Carrying parties were targeted by field artillery at unavoidable crossing points, and what finally arrived after often interminable waits was a cold, muddy broth accompanied by dirty, mouldy bread.

The 'industrial' character of the war had encouraged the organisation of a tormenting bureaucracy extending to the foremost lines. Company and battalion commanders, under threat of severe reprimands or transfer to less healthy fronts, had to complete an incredible number of forms: tables and statistics covering strength, sickness, reserve food, ammunition, where enemy shells had fallen and at what rate. Thus every dead man and every artillery round became a kilogram of paper. Less innocent information was often demanded as well, because higher commands were curious to know which enemy formations faced them. The least that might be required was a venture into no man's land to recover the freshest corpses and identify their units from their collar badges; alternatively, prisoners had to be captured. Patrols therefore set ambushes and were themselves exposed to ambush, since the enemy had exactly the same methods, intentions and desires.

When bad weather raged, the trenches became baths in which it was unhealthy to lie down and equally unhealthy to stand up. Their occupants were trapped between two horizontal dangers: acute articular rheumatism and the enemy bullet. The unhealthy, sedentary life weakened the body and brutalised morale, leaving the combatants pale and sluggish. The desire to preserve a certain decency vanished even when there was occasionally an opportunity to do so: one would die all the same. If a man became ill enough to be sent to hospital, in nine cases out of ten he was returned to his unit with a good dose of castor oil inside him and a Carabiniere at his side, lest any foolish ideas enter his head.

Returning to the line, or marching to rest after spending weeks at the front, took place painfully at night in exhausting marches made slow because the enemy must not be informed that a relief was under way. In the deepest darkness it was possible to lose the route and suddenly find oneself among men wearing the long blue-grey greatcoat of the Imperial Army. Since darkness was mutual, a few words of German - a softly whispered 'Teufel', for example - might on such occasions save a man from captivity.

General Capello, certainly not a biased witness, described the arrival of the 135th Infantry Regiment at Vipulzano on 3 December 1915:

> It made a painful impression on me. The troops began arriving this morning and at 4 p.m. they are still coming in scattered groups. It is an endless tail of groups of three or four men dragging themselves along painfully, badly equipped, disordered in appearance, with gaunt and suffering faces. Every organic bond has been broken; I am not exaggerating. From information received I have had to conclude that the march was conducted without any rule and amid many difficulties; it seems that even the food supply failed.

Elsewhere he recalled seeing not men, but 'walking pieces of mud'. From the bottom of the hierarchy, Second Lieutenant Carlo Salsa described approximately the same units at approximately the same time:

> An endless procession passes slowly, descending to the village from the nearby heights like a muddy flow from an enormous wound. They pass in silence, wrenching their feet from the mud with difficulty: a procession of misery, exhaustion and suffering.
>
> Almost all have enormous feet swollen by frostbite, wrapped in trench sacks or tied to burst-open shoes; they struggle clumsily along like waterfowl upon those filthy bundles of caked mud. Faces distorted by wrinkles and bristling with unkempt beards pass like ruins full of cracks and weeds, and adolescent faces hollowed by anguish and fever; broad shoulders curve like keels beneath exhaustion, and jackets seem empty, thrown over the dry sticks of a field scarecrow. Earthen crusts disguise the uniforms and level every face into the same yellowish colour.

Propaganda did not miss the chance to appropriate even the walking pieces of mud. Yellowish uniforms and frostbitten feet wrapped in rags became camouflage uniforms and silent shoes with which the brave battalions prepared by night to storm San Michele.

Even this kind of life had survivors. Few, but some returned. As the years passed, the burning memory began to fade, together with the pain, suffering and curses. The survivors rejoiced at being alive again, and endurance itself came to seem a great achievement. They told their adventures once and enjoyed it so much that they began an endless series of repetitions. As they aged, they boasted to younger people that they had been remarkable men in their youth; and who knew, perhaps they would still be remarkable, perhaps better than the young men of today. Yet each time the story was repeated one true detail disappeared and a false one was added, without malice. History - their personal history and the history of everyone - changed into legend.

If the trench was hard, the assault was a nightmare. In the trench, filthy and lice-ridden soldiers were brutalised by the idleness imposed upon them because every movement was dangerous. Their health was undermined by bad hygiene and by the torments of water, sun, cold and heat. Going out on patrol by night; ambushing enemy patrols and falling into their ambushes; placing tubes of blasting gelatine beneath the wire; waiting for dawn in advanced positions and attempting to observe the enemy trench without moving; then the painful withdrawal centimetre by centimetre so as not to be seen, or a lightning dash through machine-gun bullets once discovered - all this was dangerous. Hard and dangerous, but bearable. The assault was not.

To leave the protection of the trench and throw oneself into the void towards weapons spitting fire according to a pattern studied for months; to have survival determined by a purely statistical fact, namely not finding oneself in a bullet's path; to undergo repeated decimation until, at the end of a series of attacks, only a small group of survivors stared at one another bewildered and terrified - this reached the limit of what a normal human being could endure.

Each time a human being was subjected to such a test, he lost part of his personality and part of his capacity to understand and choose. After a certain number of such experiences, the young combatant became psychologically damaged. There were cases of suicide caused by fear of having to assault. Sudden insanity was by no means uncommon. Frescura wrote in his diary:

> A second lieutenant passed with his men. I heard him say as they climbed the dolina: 'Forward, boys, forward!' He seemed calm and serene. His fine, fresh voice did not betray the storm in his poor brain. Suddenly he threw himself upon the nearest of his men with clenched fists, screaming like a damned soul. He had gone mad.

Second Lieutenant Mario Quaglia recorded another case in his diary:

> A few days ago, on that stretch of road below Sleme, a muleteer was walking calmly down towards Libussina with his good mule behind him. At that exact moment one of those great pots that come from who knows where exploded above him and swept away the mule without harming the man. At Libussina some soldiers saw a muleteer approaching quietly at a walking pace, one arm raised and a halter in his hand, as though he were still leading his animal. At first they laughed; then they realised that they were dealing with a madman and had him taken to hospital.

Very many men suffered shock followed by muteness. When a cure was possible it was generally entrusted to brisk methods, well described by the Domenica del Corriere:

> The curious cures of soldiers struck mute in war. There are many cases. Private Nicola Disarmo was kept fasting for twenty-four hours by the medical captain Dr Spadacci, who on the following day placed him under ether. He then said: your mother is in the next room, you must speak to her; call your mother. And the soldier cried out: ma... ma... mother. This cure is remarkable because it was not due to chance, but to a scientific procedure.

Still more numerous were the men who would be recognised only years later as permanently dulled after enduring an experience beyond their strength: people able to answer the simplest questions and showing

confusion only when the examination went deeper, but by then incapable of fighting or even of defending themselves.

Nor did shell-concussion shock alone produce such effects. The attrition caused by constant feverish tension was sufficient to put a man out of action. Medical Colonel Gerundo explicitly acknowledged this as early as 8 January 1916 in a communication to the command of VI Army Corps:

> Prolonged trench life, in addition to the physical effects produced in the organism by the hardships endured, produces others of a psychological nature. For some time frequent cases of nervous exhaustion have been observed, especially among officers. Most present in a depressive form and some, fortunately rare, in an excited form. The former generally appear apathetic, inert, lacking in will and stunned; the latter display alternating phenomena of excitability and depression.
>
> The latter forms are observed chiefly in those who bear direct responsibility and who by nature and temperament do not possess sufficient nervous energy to overcome the emotions intimately connected with the special life at the front. In general it may be asserted that these psychological disorders originate in the conditions of life in the trenches, especially those continually exposed to enemy attack. Remaining inactive with the obsessive thought that at any moment one may have to rush into an attack or undergo one, and doing so for hours and days, certainly exerts a powerful influence on the development of these disorders of the nervous system.

Colonel Gerundo's proposed remedy was rather obvious: 'These disorders,' he said, 'benefit from prolonged rest far from the front.'

> The assault! The assault in this war is the most terrible thing the human mind can imagine - so terrible that since yesterday I have dreamed only of seeing it warded for ever from my son's head.

Gasparotto wrote these words after an unsuccessful attack on the hill of Oslavia: 220 men had gone into the assault and forty survived. Everything took place in four hours, a half-life of one hundred minutes.

Since the war continued, and assaults with it, it was impossible to make each man taste the bitter medicine only once. The tendency was instead to use more frequently the units that had performed best. On the other hand, no normal person, however modest his mental capacity, would willingly repeat the experience. Courage was therefore injected artificially through alcohol. As time passed, most combatants became alcoholics or at least intoxicated. Newcomers were fastidious, but not for long. Within days they too capitulated.

And the defenders? They - normally the Austrians - endured the torture of living for several dozen hours beneath the infernal bombardments preceding Italian assaults. Fifty shells per linear metre was a good average. Half were medium-calibre rounds, 149-millimetre 'pills', each capable of blowing up a house. The Austrians therefore also drank to stupefaction and beyond. The men who generally remained unaffected were hardened poker or morra players, insensible to the end of the world.

An entire generation of young men condemned to cirrhosis and alcoholism? Not entirely, because most of them died. War thus proved to be the 'world's only hygiene', as the avant-garde poet Marinetti had prophesied.

Italian artillery, so deficient in quality and quantity at the outbreak of war, had been considerably enlarged over the months. On the eve of Caporetto it possessed the substantial total of 7,138 guns and 2,000 trench mortars. Full use of this now abundant resource was still limited, however, by the absence of two important factors: a generous supply of shells and tactical flexibility capable of extracting every possible advantage from the strength deployed.

As for the first factor, daily shell production had risen from about 10,000 to 40,000 rounds. It had therefore kept pace with the increase in guns, but had not exceeded it as necessary. This amounted to

only five shells per gun per day. Since a gun fired an average of two hundred rounds during a day of action, if half the artillery was engaged in an offensive, every day of fire consumed the production of twenty working days; a week required four months of production. This limitation already fixed the maximum intensity possible for any offensive launched by the Italian army in 1917.

The second defect was far less mechanical. Correcting it required intelligent cooperation between commanders and subordinates, together with a high level of organisation.

Every front-line formation complained of the enormous delay with which supporting batteries responded to requests. It was not rare for a call for intervention to be met the following day, when the requesting officer had already resigned himself to the situation. If, despite the absence of support, he had meanwhile captured the enemy positions, he risked being flattened by an 'effective' intervention from the artillery, finally awakened by the slow chain of orders.

The French army had long decentralised to divisional control all artillery, whether field or medium-calibre, provided it could intervene effectively against enemy infantry. Among the Austro-Germans, considerable freedom was left to the initiative of individual battery commanders. In Italy, by contrast, a rigidly centralised principle had long been followed. Around the middle of September 1916, Supreme Command, which had noticed the resulting disadvantages, issued orders for a rational decentralisation of responsibility for the use of artillery. Their practical implementation was sabotaged by commanders of large formations, who were extremely jealous of their right to order fire. General Capello recalled some less than brilliant examples in his War Notes:

> Towards the end of August 1916 I met an artillery colonel. The conversation naturally turned to the employment of the arm, and with the greatest simplicity and naturalness he told me that during the previous summer, while our troops were making for the third or fourth time one of the usual unfortunate attempts to attack towards Monte Interrotto [three kilometres north-west of Asiago], he had clearly seen from his observation post an enemy battery directing a terrible fire upon our infantry. He understood that with his guns he could silence and perhaps destroy the enemy battery; but the attack was being conducted by another division - an Italian division, nevertheless! - and his batteries had orders not to fire!
>
> He did not believe himself authorised to disobey the order. Recognising, however, the opportunity and urgency of intervention, he asked the command upon which he depended for permission to open fire. The request was routed through the complicated telephone network, bristling with obstacles and switchboards, and sent to the higher technical and tactical authorities. The answer travelled back by the same route and arrived the next day: negative! Meanwhile, as usual, while the telephones slowly transmitted and the higher commands thought or dozed, our infantry had been crushed by the enemy artillery.

More revealing than exceptionally unfortunate cases was the average behaviour, which was far from satisfactory. An inquiry into events on the Asiago plateau in the autumn of 1916 revealed, for example, that on one occasion artillery support requested at 9.40 in the morning was obtained late in the afternoon. On another, Austrian artillery maintained heavy fire from nine until eleven, while Italian counter-battery fire began only at one o'clock, after the enemy had already stopped of its own accord. After extending the list with similar episodes, the inquiry concluded:

> It is evident that, even if an absolute need to fire had arisen, it would have been possible to carry out the fire only after an enormous delay.

General Capello observed:

> Those who supported centralisation based their position on the need to coordinate and concentrate action, but in this way they came up against another need, still greater and more urgent: prompt

> intervention. Coordination can be obtained without centralisation by training the various activities and regulating and guiding individual initiative. Prompt intervention, however, cannot be obtained without reasonable decentralisation. Promptness is necessary in every engagement, but still more so in trench warfare. Opposing trenches are often separated by only a few paces, and all actions, small and large, although generally prepared methodically and far in advance, most often erupt with surprise and great violence. The defender's reaction must answer the attacker's action immediately, in order to smother the enemy impetus at birth.

Lack of training had also led to neglect of the creeping barrage, a practice already mastered by other armies. The French had been the first to adopt it on a large scale in the autumn of 1916. The successful assault on Fort Douaumont had been achieved by reducing to a minimum the time available to the Germans to meet the attack of Senegalese and Somali infantry. Such a device was not a cure for every ill. More than once the creeping barrage had moved like a stupid dinosaur at the speed previously agreed with the infantry, while the infantry, halted at the first enemy positions, suddenly found itself without support. Signals and counter-orders followed, then the barrage had to move backwards, not without danger to the unfortunate infantrymen. Yet there were cases in which this and other technical devices could seize the fleeting opportunity.

In the Italian army the creeping barrage had been abandoned, although General Capello had conducted experiments on the Grafenberg near Gorizia as early as the middle of 1916. A British officer commanding an artillery group on the Italian front, Lieutenant-Colonel Buzzard, wrote:

> Timetables are never observed. Fire ceases too early; the infantry is not supported while crossing four or five hundred metres. The remarkable thing is that, with such a lack of cooperation between artillery and infantry, the Italian infantry nevertheless reaches some of its objectives. The artillery preparation is good and many infantry units are genuinely heroic; but advancing behind the screen of a suitable creeping barrage is something completely unfamiliar.

The rigid-fire system contrasted with the German system, since the Germans had immediately adopted the French technique. To face them on the Italian front therefore meant being subjected to methods they had thoroughly tested in both defence and attack, and consequently being exposed to the worst surprises. Because the Italian war had until then been predominantly offensive, little attention had been given to training in controlled fire against moving targets, which was much more important in defence. This concealed a position of weakness that was among the causes of the rout at Caporetto.

Trench life had encouraged a flowering of songs among the troops in the line, covering every aspect of their wretched and dangerous existence. The words of conventional rhetoric were consistently absent from soldiers' songs: there was no Fatherland, Italy, Trento or Trieste. Those themes echoed more loudly the farther one went from the fighting zone, reaching their greatest frequency in the variety shows and cafés-chantants of the large cities. There flags were everywhere; the tricolour was squandered on dancers in three colours, tricolour bands, scenery and backdrops. The safer the spectator felt, the harder he applauded. The few who did not share the general enthusiasm - and who were regarded with suspicion - were usually veterans on a few days' leave. They found the spectacle very strange: the Austrians, invariably tricked, always played the fools. Defeating them would therefore have been easy, had the combatants not been such good-for-nothings.

Poems and songs arising from the simple soul of the soldier were generally tuned to endless sadness: sorrowful paeans lacking grammar but not feeling.

> *Behind the bridge there is a graveyard,*
> *a graveyard for us soldiers.*
> *Ta-pum, ta-pum, ta-pum,*
> *ta-pum, ta-pum, ta-pum.*

When you are behind that little wall,
little soldier, you can speak no more.
Ta-pum, ta-pum, ta-pum,
ta-pum, ta-pum, ta-pum.

When we have come down to the plain,
battalion, you have no soldiers left.
Ta-pum, ta-pum, ta-pum,
ta-pum, ta-pum, ta-pum.

Battalion of all the dead,
how many shirkers there are in Milan.
Ta-pum, ta-pum, ta-pum,
ta-pum, ta-pum, ta-pum.

Graveyard for us soldiers,
perhaps one day I shall come to find you.
Ta-pum, ta-pum, ta-pum,
ta-pum, ta-pum, ta-pum.

The next song moved from irony to savage sarcasm:

An advance is that thing
you make by moving your feet;
how fine it is, behind a rock,
to watch the others advance.

The following stanza was unfairly dedicated to battalion commanders, many of whom had left their lives on the field:

The major is that thing
that commands the battalion;
but when the cannon starts firing,
the major is no longer there.

The infantrymen's growing impatience was recalled in these verses:

Thirty-six months I have been a soldier,
and I see a little letter arrive.
Report to the captain, sir,
and ask whether he will send me on leave.

I would send you on leave,
provided you return like a good soldier.
I swear it, Captain, sir:
from leave I shall never return.

In some songs a vein of optimism mingled with the sadness:

When the camp is sleeping,
I stand guard thinking of my sweetheart.
If I were to fall and remain here,
my Peppina could not marry,
because we swore at God's altar:
you are my bride and I your bridegroom.
So I cannot fall and remain here;
I must marry my Peppina.

Another good-naturedly mocked the Territorial Militia, armed with the old Vetterli rifle, whose muzzle was closed by a red plug:

The 'Terrible' is on its way,
and the enemy cries, 'I am running!'
The Terrible fires the plug
that sits upon the rifle's muzzle.

It fires the rifle plug
and the Germans surrender.
We should truly be in trouble
without the Territorial!

The old and bloody glories were not forgotten:

San Michele, San Michele,
betrayal of my life.
I left my sweetheart
to come and conquer you.

The Alpini elegy had been composed by one of their own:

O vile Monte Nero,
betrayer of my country,
I left my home
to come and conquer you...

...

To come and conquer you
we lost many comrades,
all young men of twenty;
their lives will never return...

The 'official' or semi-official songs had the defect of referring to events in military or political news about which the soldiers knew absolutely nothing. They were therefore sung only when formed-up troops were given the starting note by their officers:

We shall avenge the martyrs
of Brescia and Verona,
the mocked victims
of the torpedoed Ancona,
and the mutilated flesh
of Belgian children,
and the violated flesh
of Serbian women.

General Capello, who had indulged himself by measuring the political and military knowledge of some units under his command, discovered that in an entire battalion only two or three soldiers remembered who Cesare Battisti was, barely three months after the martyr's execution. In an entire Bersaglieri regiment no one knew, several weeks after the battle, that Gorizia had been captured. One may therefore imagine the response produced by the torpedoing of the liner Ancona on 7 November 1915, or the echo aroused by the 'violated' flesh of Serbian women.

The year 1917 also brought misfortune to a young junior officer from Figline Valdarno, Vittorio Locchi. He was aboard the transport Minos, bound for Albania, when a German submarine torpedoed and sank it in the autumn. Only a few months earlier he had composed Sagra di Santa Gorizia (The Pageant of Saint Gorizia):

...
Ready, Twelfth!
Division of bronze, the hour has come.
Casale Brigade,
Pavia Brigade,
Eleventh, Twelfth,
Twenty-seventh,
Twenty-eighth Infantry:
watch for the signal!
watch for the signal!
Three minutes more,
two minutes,
one: 'Fix bayonets!'
And all the bayonets
flower above the trenches.
The whole forest of points
sways, moves,
throws itself upon the mountain,
...

In no belligerent country were the soldiers of 1917 the same men as those of 1914 or 1915. The General Staffs had failed to measure the moral as well as material wear suffered by soldiers through many months of mistreatment. Coming into contact with reality only very rarely, they had constructed a schematic vision of war which it was dangerous to challenge. Anyone reporting the decline of offensive spirit risked being considered faint-hearted and, if he belonged to the higher command, being 'torpedoed' as a defeatist. Falsehood therefore became normal in daily relations between superior and subordinate. The food was naturally always 'excellent', the enemy invariably 'depressed', and losses in individual attacks 'extraordinarily light in relation to the results obtained'.

War had assumed an industrial character dominated by bureaucracy and statistics. Offensives were halted when the consumption of ammunition, equipment and men had become excessive; they began again when the depots, including those containing human flesh, had been replenished.

Abandoned in their isolation during the long winter nights of tense and nervous quiet between the death of 1916 and the birth of 1917, the combatants tormented themselves trying to discover how they might put an end to it and imagining the fiercest revenge. Few commanders suspected the growth of such feelings; otherwise they would not have felt so happy to command. Clearly sarcastic sayings and maxims were customary:

'When the order arrives, wait for the counter-order.'
'The enemy shall not pass... and neither shall we.'
'The enemy is not in front, but behind us.'

The last saying was repeated with knowing looks not so much by ordinary soldiers as by the senior commanders in the line.

The combatants were left with the marks of valour: glorious wounds, though not always - as in the case of a corporal whose testicles had been cleanly carried away and who, his captain remarked, would not be able to display that wound to the village beauties. They were also left with decorations: Gold Medals, often posthumous; Silver and Bronze Medals; the War Cross; and the Cross of Merit instituted by Cadorna. Yet the distribution of medals also left much to be desired, because many acts of courage went unknown or had no witness other than the man who performed them.

Supreme Command became increasingly sparing with medals as rank decreased. Alpini officers, who suffered 1,542 dead and 3,982 wounded, received thirty-nine Gold Medals. Non-commissioned officers

and other ranks, who suffered 41,768 dead and 89,497 wounded - no fewer than 131,265 men out of action - received one (!) Gold Medal.

In return, the front-line combatants saw the breasts of illustrious safe-billet men, or people who were only rarely exposed to enemy attack, glittering with decorations. The soldiers took revenge by inventing rather ferocious citations:

> *'Awarded the Silver Medal because, surrounded by six Austrians, he killed nine and took the others prisoner.'*
>
> *'Awarded the Silver Medal because his anti-aircraft battery almost hit an enemy aeroplane.'*
>
> *'Awarded a second Silver Medal for the courage shown in wearing the first.'*

The moral meaning of decorations was not enhanced by their excessive use to honour illustrious personalities, politicians and other eminent figures. The intention, perhaps justified in itself, to show them esteem was often transformed into an unprovoked insult to those who had earned the medals through courage rather than philanthropy or words.

It was also wearying to see the customary phrases placed in the mouths of dying men in medal citations and journalists' reports: 'Long live Italy', 'Long live the King', 'I die content', 'I am happy to offer my life to the Fatherland.' Not one man appeared to die cursing or forgetting the prescribed formulas. Carlo Salsa shows how events could be distorted:

> Another wounded man arrives, carried in arms. He laments in a Muslim-sounding chant and rocks his head continually, occasionally trying to struggle free with sudden convulsions. A short time ago, while he was returning, he was struck by a jagged splinter like a piece of coal that shattered his shoulder. I have him placed on the ground while we wait for Sangiorgi to arrive with his medical bag. In a short time the place where he lies becomes a pool of blood.
>
> Suddenly the wounded man raises himself laboriously on his elbows and cries: 'If I find anyone shouting Long live the war again...' A collapse throws him back onto his soaked rags. 'Oh yes, long live the war!' he gasps, with the furious eyes of an animal vainly trying to spring again. Sangiorgi comes running and lifts the wounded man, trying to apply bandages upon which the instantaneous flowers of blood bloom. 'Long live the war!'
>
> He is delirious. In his agony those words have become fixed like the foolish phrases of the hallucinated, with the desolation of a final cry from a shipwreck. The lieutenant-colonel emerges from the trench and approaches. He examines the wounded man with his hands braced upon his knees. 'Long live the war!' the dying man cries again. Then he suddenly collapses and lies motionless. 'He is dead,' Sangiorgi mutters after listening for a moment. The lieutenant-colonel draws himself up and says: 'He died a hero, shouting Long live the war.'

Members of every army were united in contempt and dislike for the press, which described an unrecognisable war on another planet and states of mind that were utterly false: a press that, often without realising it, performed more a task of stuffing heads than a service of information and criticism.

A British soldier wrote in a British newspaper on 21 October 1916:

> An entirely conventional type of soldier has been invented, whose emotions and ideas are nothing other than those you yourselves have found easiest to digest with your coffee and jam: a 'Tommy' who is at once ridiculous and repulsive. To hear you tell it, he is always and invariably cheerful, exulting in the excitement of war and in his unchanging sport of killing other men and hunting Germans, driving them from their holes as a terrier drives out rats.

> As for the first and material element of war, which colours everything else - the interminable and terrible physical exhaustion - you say nothing, because it would spoil the liveliness and verve of the picture.

The artificial type of soldier manufactured by the press had erased differences of race and nation, since it recurred identically among all belligerents. The trenches were not shown in their terrible reality, but transformed into underground villas lacking nothing, from electric lights to pianos and showers, where men sang cheerfully in the evening: a healthy, sporting life combining comfort with the pleasure of danger. Musical instruments were almost indispensable accessories of these cheerful and distinguished soldiers. The accordion suited the French, the bagpipes the British, and naturally mandolins, guitars and pipes suited the Italians. It almost seemed that they could not do without them even during an assault, when a musical instrument would have been a rather troublesome encumbrance.

On the back cover of the Domenica del Corriere of 30 September 1917, the indefatigable Achille Beltrame depicted a cheerful descent by several Austrian prisoners escorted by a few unarmed, ruddy Italians. Beneath it appeared the caption:

> Having captured forty Austrians and... a guitar in a cave, Private Buoncompagni places himself at the head of the prisoners and leads them to our lines while singing popular songs.

A week later:

> Fortune favours the bold. A Sardinian corporal suddenly leaps into a trench and shouts, 'Throw down your weapons and go away!' The astonished Austrians obey.

And the illustration showed a figure like Christ driving the merchants from the Temple.

The journalists were not entirely to blame. For a long time Supreme Command had regarded them as a nuisance, or worse, as involuntary spies. Even when the initial restrictions were relaxed and war correspondents were able - rarely, and more often from afar than close at hand - to tell and reconstruct what happened, their lack of genuine contact and fear of censorship meant that their dispatches from the front were never much appreciated. Descriptions so distant from reality and so optimistic gave soldiers the impression that journalists were accomplices in prolonging the war and its sufferings, helping to spread the belief that the combatants remained far from the limit of endurance. Even the most famous war correspondents did not escape this judgement. An heroic combatant who later fell in battle wrote home of Luigi Barzini, one of the best:

> When a shell explodes in a cemetery, Barzini says that 'the crosses bow as it passes', but he does not say that corpses in an advanced state of decomposition are blown into fragments and their stench poisons God knows how many kilometres of trench. Where he stood the stench could not be smelled; where we stood, it was impossible to breathe.

Another error made by Italian Supreme Command and the press was to accept Austrian propaganda in the naming of the battles on the Isonzo. The Austrians began to speak of the First, Second and so on down to the Ninth and Tenth Battles of the Isonzo, the latter opening the spring campaign of 1917. Since they were always Italian offensives, it was natural to exclaim: 'Look at that! Cadorna begins the Tenth Battle of the Isonzo and is still, always, on the Isonzo.'

The Austrians said this sarcastically, and the French and British whispered it too, since to them it was clear that Cadorna did not know what he was doing. The Allies could boast battles with many different names: Ypres, Loos, Picardy, Artois and Champagne, Verdun and the Somme. They were battles fought over depths every bit as microscopic as those on the Isonzo, but the variety of names succeeded in confusing the issue. Lloyd George also corrected this distortion of the facts:

> It has been said that up to that time [the end of 1916] the Italian army had made little progress in its repeated attacks upon the Austrian army. In reality, the Italians had advanced much farther than we had at Loos or on the Somme, or than the French had in Artois, Champagne and on the Somme, although the terrain there was far more favourable.

Although most Italian combatants behaved courageously, a small but not negligible minority behaved cowardly, and in order to achieve their purpose were compelled to perform genuine acts of courage.

One soldier calmly took off a shoe and shot himself through the foot. He then put the shoe back on and ran to the field hospital, shouting that he had been wounded. He was examined, tried and shot. Others resorted to more cunning and dangerous expedients. Some who had contracted spotted fever carefully hid their infected clothing before entering hospital, so that they could infect themselves again as soon as they returned cured, although mortality from typhus exceeded the average mortality of six months in the front line. Other desperate men injected putrid matter beneath their skin, including faeces. One soldier whose trick was discovered, when asked whether he had used his own excrement or someone else's, confessed that he had preferred a comrade's, believing that his own would not be effective enough to produce an abscess. Another man, again with the help of an accommodating comrade, smeared one eye liberally with gonorrhoeal pus and produced a severe conjunctivitis. The offence of self-mutilation was discovered because he proved free of venereal disease. During the investigation, the infection grew so serious that during a dressing the eye came out of its socket and the poor wretch was left one-eyed. At the end of the trial, which concluded with a severe sentence, the condemned man abused his defence counsel and blew kisses and greetings to the prosecution, which had succeeded in securing enough years in prison to avert his return to the front and the chance of redeeming himself, as happened to men receiving shorter sentences.

As the number of self-mutilators increased, however, the threshold of safety was continually raised. To earn a sentence that did not entail being sent back to the very front line, a man had to disfigure himself more and more conspicuously. It was not uncommon for soldiers to wait for a shell to burst and then cut off a hand with an axe, pretending that the explosion had struck them. Suspicion usually arose because it was the left hand. The passage between self-inflicted incapacity and execution became an ever narrower bottleneck, into which only the darkest desperation could drive a man. A group of soldiers was collectively reported to a military court for having brought on jaundice by eating gunpowder. And some genuine shirkers who had fraudulently secured medical rejection showed their courage by swallowing enough caffeine to burst the heart when they were about to undergo a review examination.

In all, military courts pronounced many hundreds of death sentences in 1917, of which 359 were carried out. To these must be added several hundred summary executions, so that each of the forty or fifty divisions engaged in bitter fighting during 1917 had its dozen men shot as a salutary example and warning to cowards. The scene of a capital execution was painful and shattering; the arrangements and ritual were cruel. The firing squad had to be supplied by the same unit to which the condemned man belonged: the men required to fire were his comrades, those who knew him and had lived beside him. Around the three available sides of the square stood representatives of every unit in the regiment, with the most rebellious and the greatest malingerers in each detachment, so that they might learn.

At the last moment the men about to die were dragged in. Some showed admirable courage and contempt for death. "Lads, watch how a man dies!" cried a Sicilian before the commanding officer gave the order. Others displayed sovereign indifference. But the youngest rebelled against the fate imposed upon them: they screamed, struggled and begged for mercy. They were tied to the post but did not cease twisting, their mouths foaming and trembling, until the volley - or the coup de grace, when necessary -

silenced their hoarse voices. The witnesses generally went away feeling that they had attended a murder. Better, then, the summary executions, without so much ceremony and without the lesson.

Cases of desertion to the enemy were extremely rare. A natural sense of restraint and an atavistic, primitive patriotism helped prevent the phenomenon from spreading. The Italian soldier did not hate the Austrian, but he was unwilling to give his opponent enough credit to consider the enemy's cause better than our own.

There also remained the fact that captivity in the Habsburg Empire was an unattractive prospect. From time to time, convoys arrived of prisoners returned by Austria because they were no longer fit for any labour in war or peace: consumptives, severely mutilated men and the blind. What they told did nothing to encourage surrender. Hunger, born of the blockade with which the Entente, including Italy, sought to strangle the Central Powers, was the most feared enemy. The prisoner-of-war camps, the Kriegsgefangenenlager, had become, in the Milanese prisoners' rendering, Crist-che-fam-de-lader. Of the half-million Italians taken prisoner by the Austrians during the war, one hundred thousand did not return. Their bodies fertilised the ground around Mauthausen, Sigmundsherberg and Dunaszerdahely, or in distant Galicia and Bukovina, where many had been sent for road work; they fell victim to hunger, epidemics and sometimes the stick. Even on this subject, although most prisoners had been captured wounded on the battlefield, Gabriele D'Annunzio had felt obliged to pronounce a historic judgement:

> A man who allows himself to be taken prisoner may truly be said to sin against the Fatherland, against the Soul and against Heaven. Whether unfortunate or disgraced, he forfeits his right to glory.

Translator's note: Crist-che-fam-de-lader reproduces a Milanese dialect pun on Kriegsgefangenenlager, approximately meaning "Christ, what murderous hunger!".

Far more conspicuous was desertion within the country. During 1917 the number of men attempting to escape their military obligations by flight rose continuously, from about two thousand in April to five thousand in August. Before Caporetto, more than one hundred thousand deserters and draft evaders were counted - a modest proportion in relative terms, less than three per cent of those called up, but an impressive absolute figure. They represented an army of outlaws which had to be controlled by an even larger number of soldiers, carabinieri and policemen.

A public notice was posted on the doors of houses occupied by families whose member had been declared a deserter, so that everyone would know of the offence. When this psychological persecution proved insufficient, leave was often denied to soldiers from regions which supplied more deserters than others. Thus, during the winter of 1917, leave was suspended for Sicilians because, according to the Supreme Command, forty thousand deserters and draft evaders were counted among them. That figure, however, included all those who had emigrated from Italy before the war and had not answered the call to arms. The true deserters resident on the island appear instead to have numbered no more than four thousand.

Others fled or attempted to flee abroad. Eight thousand Italian deserters even took refuge in France, which as an ally was very reluctant to return them because, owing to the shortage of manpower, they could be profitably employed in industry. Others sought safer refuge in distant lands, the United States for example, before the entry of the Starred Confederation into the war once again made the ground burn beneath their feet. A clandestine passage from Genoa cost between 300 and 1,500 lire, and numerous centres for forging the required documents operated and prospered until the hand of the police inexorably seized them.

In many cases, however, the law condemned itself. A man living abroad who failed to answer the call immediately was declared a draft evader, suffered all the penal consequences of that legal act and no

longer dared present himself. The threat therefore made irrecoverable men who might otherwise have been recovered. Hence a parliamentary bill introduced on 27 January 1917 to grant an amnesty "in favour of emigrant draft evaders". Once the United States entered the war, Italians living there were permitted exemption from the Italian call to arms if they could demonstrate, by means of a certificate issued by the American government, that they were indispensable to the American war effort.

For the immense majority who were prepared to do their duty, there remained the occasional temptation to report sick and steal a few days of relief. Opportunities were frequent, since the trench certainly did not strengthen the body. As one of the many popular verses recalled:

> The trench is the sort of place
> that keeps you standing in the water.
> It is a bathing cure
> rather ill suited to the season.

Although the army's health conditions were mediocre, they had not degenerated into widespread pestilence, apart from cholera, which appeared and was brought under control in 1915. Hemingway, among many others, testifies that "they managed to stop it and only seven thousand men died of it in the whole army". Meningitis spread for a time; dysentery, typhoid and malaria remained endemic, and the "Spanish influenza" had not yet appeared. The measures adopted meant that deaths from disease contracted on service were in total distinctly fewer than deaths in combat. Yet as human material grew scarce, doctors became more severe towards the genuinely or supposedly sick. Lieutenant Muccini recalls:

> At sick parade there are lines of ill men, but the doctor gives castor oil to everyone.
>
> "Take a breath... show your tongue. Excellent. Fit for duty."
>
> "Fever? Excellent. You need fresh air. Fit for duty."
>
> Some even land in prison.

At times all this risked ending tragically. Carlo Salsa tells us:

> An ambulance wagon is waiting in the courtyard. Through its windows I can see the superimposed stretchers filled with heaps of rags.
>
> A bundle slowly curls upon a stretcher; a head rises and a face appears.
>
> "Wounded?"
>
> "Frostbitten feet."
>
> "Are you going to hospital?"
>
> "Yes, sir."
>
> "How is it?"
>
> He is a boy who speaks like an old man: sad as an old man.
>
> "They have to cut off my feet, Lieutenant, sir, both of them. This morning the colonel said they must amputate, and at once. You know, here they act quickly, but late. My lieutenant had already sent me down twice with my feet like this, like two flat cakes. And the doctor sent me back to the line under

> escort by the carabinieri for part of the way. He said otherwise he would have had to send the whole regiment to hospital, and that in any case one can stay perfectly well in the trench sitting down. But he does not try it himself."
>
> I know the serenity with which certain scoundrels, who turn pale at the mere suspicion that the red crosses may not be visible enough, discuss the dangers and sufferings of the fools who remain in the trench.

Life did not end there, at least for combatants who had lost only one leg - fortunate men compared with the "matched" cases, those whose two limbs had both been amputated. They were cared for in good hospitals where, in addition to retraining them, efforts were made to amuse them: running races were organised, naturally with the competitors hopping on one foot, while men possessing two stumps acted as an applauding and encouraging audience. The hundred thousand disabled men left as the war's legacy certainly had the right to begin living again.

When protest against the martyrdom assumed the form of mutiny, reprisals were proportionate to the ferocity of the times. What happened to the Ravenna Brigade - the 37th and 38th Infantry Regiments - is illuminating.

It was the end of March 1917, and General Capello had only recently assumed command of the new army formation called the Gorizia Zone, created to take part in the forthcoming offensive. The Ravenna Brigade had been in the line for five months: months of unspeakable suffering and dreadful slaughter. At last came the longed-for relief, the relief for the mere thought of which the survivors had lived through the previous weeks: relief, rest, a little easing of the tension that broke the nerves. The brigade set out for Savogna, a village just south of Gorizia and six kilometres from the front line.

Two evenings later, as soon as the tents had been pitched, came the counter-order: the brigade was to return to the line and hold the trenches of the Vertoibizza. The announcement seemed unbelievable. The soldiers were psychologically incapable of enduring the shock. Protests, shouts and cries became threatening:

- Down with the war!
- We want our rest!
- Long live peace!
- Death to the shirkers!

Someone fired shots into the air. Others, inflamed by wine, joined the shooting. The officers, no less exhausted than the soldiers, had to do violence to themselves as they urged calm and obedience.

As the night passed, tempers subsided: nothing could be done. Resigned and desperate, the two regiments resumed the march towards the front. Their commander thought that, after all, matters had gone well. No one had been wounded and no officer had been manhandled. He would write a report in which he would try to minimise the events and reduce to the smallest number the unfortunate men to be handed over to courts martial.

But the army-corps commander arrived, having heard of the sedition. He too was between the hammer and the anvil. There were the circulars: men had to be shot. There was Cadorna's decalogue, issued with farsighted anticipation on 19 May 1915, recalling the "criminal tolerance" of those who ought to be the sternest guardians of discipline. "The Supreme Command will hold responsible the commanders of large formations... who show hesitation in taking, without delay, the initiative of applying, when circumstances require it, the extreme measures of coercion and repression." The army-corps commander

certainly did not risk execution, but merely dismissal. Yet everything was relative: dismissal for a general was equivalent to death for a commoner, the general thought.

His Excellency was dissatisfied with the report and with an inquiry that would take too long. Punishment had to be immediate, "without delay". Were the guilty men unknown? Then two men from each company throughout the brigade should be chosen by lot.

Forty-eight men ought therefore to have been assembled. But many, in protest and emboldened by anger and anguish, accused themselves. Before long there were a hundred suspects who, when the officers asked, "Did you fire?", answered yes.

The 38th Regiment had been decorated by the King with the Silver Medal less than three months earlier, but this was no mitigating circumstance. Four men were shot on the first day. Then, piecemeal and at random, the process continued for a week, with two or three executions a day, in a tug-of-war between army-corps headquarters, which wanted its dead, and the brigade officers, who tried to save as many as possible; the most skilful saved their own men. Among the condemned was a corporal decorated with the Silver Medal. He admitted that he had fired; he had been drunk. He had come as a volunteer from America, where no one would have troubled him even had he been a draft evader. As he was led to execution, he declared that he believed in the moral honesty of his judges. If he had done wrong, it was right that he should pay. When the rifles were levelled, he placed a hand over the wound that had earned him the medal for valour:

- Do not shoot here. I do not want an Italian bullet to pierce the mark of my courage.

After twenty executions, army-corps headquarters considered the lesson sufficiently exemplary and ordered the slaughter stopped.

The officers who had not shown themselves hard enough nevertheless paid a price: the commanders of the division, the brigade and one regiment were removed. It was unpleasant, though preferable to being shot.

General Capello, who had forwarded the report to the Supreme Command, received orders to transmit a commendation to the subordinate command for the energy it had displayed. Capello, who in truth had had nothing to do with the affair, blocked the commendation and indulged in a little personal propaganda with his officers:

- They sent me no commendation when I took Gorizia, and they send me one now because soldiers had to be shot.

There were also the men of the firing squads: poor innocents who had fired while trembling and had been left shattered by the disturbing experience. One colonel had the compassionate idea of promising them reward leave and submitted the proposal to Army headquarters. Capello found the initiative "base" and, instead of rewarding the soldiers, removed the colonel. Morality was therefore saved.

The Supreme Command itself, however, was crushed by the need to make men fight when they were beginning to want nothing more to do with it. It was consequently forced to be inflexible with subordinate commands. According to Cadorna's own words, reported by Angelo Gatti, this is what happened to General Ruelle, commander of VI Army Corps:

> The act for which I removed him exceeded every degree of gravity. He had under his command a brigade of unruly men from Romagna. At a certain point they refused to remain in the trench for an operation; the general was not ashamed to bargain with them, promising that this would be the last occasion on which they would attack. I removed him by telegram.

What, then, did the High Commands risk by applying the severest sanctions? General Cadorna was always there, ready to assume and cover the responsibility of his subordinates. That was what had occurred in XI Army Corps, as a telegraphic circular from the Supreme Command itself explains:

> In the 1st Battalion, 75th Infantry [Napoli Brigade], on the evening of 30 October [1916] [3], extremely grave acts of indiscipline occurred, going so far as the throwing of stones at the regimental commander. The commander of XI Corps [General Cigliana], with energetic and prompt action for which I give him full and unconditional praise, ordered that two soldiers chosen by lot from among those most strongly suspected of guilt should be shot. The execution took place on the afternoon of the 31st. Yesterday further grave events of the same kind occurred in the 6th Bersaglieri Regiment and were immediately suppressed by the execution of six soldiers on the orders of the same commander of XI Corps. While reporting and approving the just severity of the commander of XI Corps, I recall that there is no other suitable means of repressing collective offences than immediately shooting the principal culprits and, whenever it is impossible to establish the personal identity of those responsible, commanders retain the right and duty to choose by lot certain soldiers from among the suspects and punish them with death. No one may evade this duty, and I make it an absolute and inescapable obligation for all commanders. As an ancillary measure of repression, I order that whenever offences against discipline occur, the granting of winter leave shall immediately be suspended for every member without distinction of the battalion or equivalent unit in which the offences occurred. This order is to be communicated to all subordinate troops. Acknowledge receipt.
>
> General Cadorna

Freed from every responsibility, commanders possessed only their conscience and humanity as standards of measure, and these were often insufficient or distorted by the same tension that exhausted the soldiers. The unfortunate commander of the 75th Infantry, for example, died a few days after the events described in the circular above, leading his troops in the assault on Dosso Faiti and earning a posthumous Gold Medal.

In an emergency it was therefore extremely easy to forget the many circulars in which Cadorna himself sought to instil other feelings in commanders:

> ... Let whoever punishes with death always ask himself in conscience whether he has done everything in his power to improve the moral and material conditions of his soldiers; whether, besides repressing, he has known how to prevent; whether he has remained in constant contact with the spirit of the troops in order to understand their aspirations, their needs, their depressions, the good and the evil; whether, in a word, he feels that he truly commands the living forces entrusted to him with that knowledge of the human heart without which no man has ever been a commander.

This circular, dated 20 July 1917, was issued five days after the mutiny of the Catanzaro Brigade, which was even more terrible than that of the Ravenna Brigade. Cadorna did not conceal from himself the danger inherent in measures of terror; and the commission of inquiry into Caporetto also acknowledged:

> Noble words inspired by the highest sentiments, exhortations to cooperation and firmness, did indeed proceed from the Supreme Command; but their application, particularly by many intermediate commanders, differed greatly from the principles proclaimed.

And what, Cadorna exclaimed, could the Supreme Command do beyond proclaiming principles and inculcating their dissemination throughout the army?

The fact remained that few deserved the title of commander. Above the junior officers, who inevitably sympathised with the soldiers whose life of hardship they shared, the transition from persecuted to persecutor occurred abruptly. It was easy to go too far and extremely difficult to maintain calm and fairness.

Captain Emilio Lussu recalls a dreadful episode. At the beginning of the Battle of Ortigara, on 10 June 1917, our troops had been withdrawn from the foremost lines so that the artillery could fire without excessive concern about striking our own trenches. On a front of only twelve kilometres, 1,500 artillery pieces had been deployed: unprecedented firepower, an infernal uproar that left everyone holding his breath. In one of the many caves, an infantry company sheltered while waiting for the fire to cease and for the order to attack.

Suddenly whole salvoes from Italian medium naval guns - 149s and 152s - struck the roof of the cave. The range was short, but the gunners did not realise it and continued pounding. One shell fell at the cave entrance and killed the company commander and several soldiers. The roof itself appeared on the point of collapsing. The terrified soldiers wanted to get out. But there was an iron order: remain under cover until the moment of the assault [4].

More shells continued to fall, and no one relished ending like a rat. Stunned and leaderless, the soldiers muttered, shouted and finally came out of the cave. But the battalion commander was inflexible and drunk. To avoid going mad he had been forced to drink strong liquor throughout the morning, and now he was beside himself. In his interpretation, this was mutiny in the face of the enemy, and therefore required decimation. Twenty soldiers were selected by lot and were to be shot.

The firing squad formed, received the order and fired high: no soldier was hit. The condemned men remained motionless and frozen. The major's rage knew no bounds:

- I shall shoot the rebels myself!

He killed the first three with his revolver. A captain who was present drew his pistol from its holster:

- Major, you are insane.

Without a word and without an order, the firing squad turned the muzzles of its rifles towards the major, fired and riddled him with bullets.

The captain reported himself; he and other officers were sent before a military court.

The cowardice of a few merely threw the courage of the many into greater relief. Yet the fact that the Italian soldier was brave did not mean that he was a good soldier. The greatest obstacle to making him one was the high level of ignorance. Italy then had an illiteracy rate of about thirty per cent, rising among peasants, especially southerners, and falling among city dwellers and the working class. The latter category, so necessary to the expansion of war production, was largely spared active service through exemptions or assignments to technical corps.

In the army, therefore, the proportion of illiterates approached fifty per cent. Officers consequently found it very difficult to make themselves understood by this uneducated mass and to penetrate its psychology.

There was an infected well from which some soldiers calmly drew water to drink, despite the warning sign. An officer approached:

- Can't you read? he asked reproachfully.

- No, sir, we can't read, came the candid answer.

An episode illustrating the difficulties of even the simplest conversation is told by the Florentine writer Giulio Bechi, who died on San Marco at the head of his regiment:

> Ten soldiers, almost all conscripts, have already entered one after another, caps in hand and heads shaved, to be questioned about their agricultural skills. Yet, as if by design, they are all Sicilians and sulphur miners by trade. The company clerk continues calling the names, making a mark on the roll

each time.

"Messina Calogero!"

The second lieutenant checks Form 39 and adds:

"Occupation: peasant."

"Ah! At last!" breathes the captain. Turning to the new arrival, a tall, beardless, gangling, sallow fellow with a horse-like profile, he asks:

"Can you mow?"

"What?"

"Mow, you know... with a scythe... cut the wheat..."

The lanky fellow stares at him in bewilderment, as though the captain were speaking Arabic. The clerk then intervenes in the native tongue:

"U formento, you know... u formento..."

"Ah! U furmento!" the soldier exclaims, his face brightening.

"Yes, the wheat," the captain presses him. "Well, can you mow it?"

At last a flash of light bursts into the conscript's brain.

"Reap?"

"Yes, yes, reap, God bless you!"

"Ah! But in my village we don't do it as you do here. There you take the wheat in your hand and then, accussì..." The soldier traces in the air the violent gesture of an executioner cutting off a condemned man's head.

"Yes, yes... you take the scythe like this..."

To support theory with example, the captain seizes the paper knife from the desk and bends his lanky body towards the floor, waving his long arms in imitation of a reaper's movement. Crouched in this way, all arms and legs, with his head and black spectacles, he looks like a large spider at work spinning its thread. The soldier begins to reap around the room as well.

"Yes, sir, accussì."

"Oh, thank goodness!" the captain puffs, standing up and wiping his forehead. "... So... you know how to mow, to reap?"

"No, sir."

For such men, imagine the difficulty of understanding the operation of complicated weapons, the use of gas masks, and the technique and tactics of combat. A further selection was therefore made to the detriment of the infantry: men capable of being assigned to guns, trench mortars, machine guns, clerical work or stores were skimmed off. The mass of the infantry was left composed of the least educated and

most ignorant men - precisely those who, being in immediate contact with the enemy, would have needed the greatest moral preparation.

What little technical knowledge the soldiers learned through blood was more than offset by the brutal debasement of their personalities. On 8 April 1917, Attilio Frescura recorded the following episode:

> Easter.
>
> At the nearby village of Turriaco, the Bersaglieri celebrated it with the resurrection of the brothel, around which they had been crowding and which had been closed because the uproar was considered indecent. The men, accustomed to assault, then overwhelmed the carabinieri, broke down the doors and entered. Some of the vestals fainted; one was carried out in triumph, naked and bewildered, "accompanied by seditious cries against the institutions and cheers for the end of the war". This evening someone commented in scorching words upon the bestial conduct of those men.
>
> Their fault is that the war has failed to teach them the exquisite composure and rules of the perfect gentleman who, between a correct bow and a skilful hand-kiss, expends his phosphorus in the drawing room of the hostess pouring his tea, repeats exquisite veiled obscenities, bleats all the Arcadian rhetoric about the bloodstained dividends of the war industries, or, between one belch and another, skims the prose about economy in consumption and the "we must win" of the Italian warmongers.

The quality of the officers charged with instructing, commanding and assisting these men was not particularly brilliant either. They too were brave and courageous, but largely unprepared. Their number had risen from 25,000 at the beginning of the war to 140,000. Allowing for irreparable losses, this was approximately the number of new commissions. Italy, however, did not possess such a multitude of university and secondary-school graduates that it could spare many of them to provide the army's officers. Moreover, many graduates preferred not to attend officer-cadet courses, since it was easier to find a safe billet as an educated private than as a junior infantry officer.

The quality of the officers had consequently deteriorated greatly, and most were said to have been made from a mould. The lack of preparation among the "cadres" - as they were bureaucratically called in contrast with the "troops" - was universally deplored. Even the King was surprised that an assistant gardener whom he had noticed several times at Villa Italia was wearing the uniform of an officer candidate. And a Finance Guard officer who requested a personal interview with his corps commander for permission to marry a worker's daughter, citing among her qualifications the fact that she had a brother who was an infantry second lieutenant, received the answer:

- Even my barber has become a second lieutenant!

> "We have had to create," Cadorna told Malagodi, "150,000 officers out of boys who possess neither authority nor discipline and who were accustomed to hissing at their teachers... An army that can be trusted cannot be created with the education in discipline that we have given our country for fifty years."

All the more so because many teachers had taught them to hiss.

Military censorship prevented an osmosis of defeatism between the army and the country. Its task was "to obliterate all communications or information of a warlike or demoralising nature, whether for the troops or for civilians". To assist it, there were preprinted field-service postcards bearing conventional phrases that summarised the essential information and questions: one merely crossed out the phrases that did not apply and left the others visible. This predigested phraseology was usually disliked, however, because it was too impersonal. Nine times out of ten the officer assigned to censorship therefore had to undertake an arduous task of interpretation.

Most soldiers' letters, disjointed in their sentences, without punctuation and sprinkled with dialect expressions, were rather difficult texts. Nor were there lacking willing illiterates who had their letters written by comrades and then copied them, like drawings, out of ambition not to appear unable to read and write. The result was hieroglyphics that were almost impossible to decipher.

For every formation equivalent to a division, two officers in rotation, under the supervision of a captain of carabinieri, performed this exhausting duty. Since the trio of censors had to examine several hundred letters every day, the work was done as best it could be - which meant that much of it remained undone. Senator Scialoja, who was responsible for war propaganda and personally inspected censorship during the summer of 1917, discovered that only two per cent of the correspondence was examined. This was partly due to the good hearts of the censors, who let things pass, trusting to the fact that under the regulations they were permitted to be idiots.

Lieutenant Lentini writes:

> In almost all the writings there was a general sorrow at the distress that had overtaken everyone. There were modest wives who confined themselves to describing the harvest and the numerous family and, when writing the greetings, usually reminded the absent man of the name of every member of the abundant kin. Others, with a sense of degenerate perversity, placed among the sheets of the letter numerous hairs which they asserted belonged to them and which were intended to remind the distant relative of something desired or previously enjoyed. Still others enclosed samples of seed, cigarettes, powders and various objects which, they wrote, would prove the quality of the harvest or would help him recover. Recover from what illness? The captain knew well enough: he had everything seized and sent to the analysis office. There it was discovered that they were medicinal powders intended to make the eyes or other parts of the body ill or inflamed, thereby making it easy to be sent to the rear. The other objects too, especially cigarettes - which were hardly needed at the front, given the daily issue - concealed harmful substances of the same kind.
>
> There were letters from inconsolable distant women friends and from loving fiancées who reproached abandonment and sometimes announced that the danger of maternity had been averted. A cheerful Roman woman used to express her delight at such a discovery by proclaiming to her marshal in large letters: "The red flag is flying over the Capitol."
>
> Numerous instances of incest were announced, not infrequently in the form of unavoidable disasters and bitter regret and reproach. A sister's anguished cry read: "Not content with infecting me, you wanted to infect the little one as well..." What greater tragedy could there be? The captain of carabinieri took the trouble to investigate and report it.
>
> There was no lack of perfumed and sentimental little letters, or of the healthy, vigorous writings of sensible friends and honest parents. The most sincere and affecting were the mothers' letters. It was difficult to find in them insults, obscenities, gossip or incitements to wrongdoing. They answered a need of the soul, exposed that soul and offered it as the greatest of possessions. They always advised right conduct, honesty and obedience. Complaints about the absent man were rare. Amid the general horror and corruption, we gladly lingered over these letters, the only ones that did not make us smile.
>
> Almost all of us still had our mothers alive, and for that reason we thought of the censors of our own letters, who, like us, would read them and seal them with the strip: "Examined by the censor."

There were also many letters speaking of riots, deserters, food shortages and other grave matters that were the inevitable consequence of the war. These were truths forbidden to the combatant, intolerable to spirits already prepared to sacrifice themselves but not their loved ones.

With a brush dipped in indelible black, the lines reproducing these voices were erased; the mouth of truth was closed for the good of the Fatherland and for the future of the children.

Yet what censorship did not wish men to know inevitably became known to those concerned during the leave to which every combatant was entitled sooner or later. Arriving from the lunar war zone, inhabited only by men in uniform apart from a few prostitutes and scattered groups of natives, most of whom spoke incomprehensible Slavic dialects, returning soldiers began to understand what was happening in their cities and home villages.

The countryman found matters worse on every visit: his family ever poorer, his male friends and relatives scattered, almost all at the front like himself. Death and mutilation had left abundant marks; agricultural labour was not easy with one leg or arm missing.

The young second lieutenant, by contrast, generally came from a city. Life in the city was bad, but not too bad. Many people, indeed, appeared to be doing extremely well. They too deplored the continuation of the war, just as it was publicly obligatory to deplore blasphemy. Yet their appearance and behaviour betrayed very different feelings. Even those who were not profiteering - the majority of his relatives and acquaintances - found it difficult to identify with the combatant's life.

As soon as he returned home, his first kiss was for his mother, who wept with emotion at seeing him again and would weep with sorrow a few days later when she watched him depart. But when he tried to describe his life, his aunt was greatly astonished that her nephew did not wash every day in the trench. What! After the upbringing he had received! This younger generation learned nothing but the worst from the war. And the lady upstairs had almost fainted at the mere mention of lice. God, what disgusting creatures! Could the soldiers not use a little disinfectant, with nothing whatever to do?

The returning soldier understood that he was not understood and could not explain himself. He almost began to feel nostalgic for his comrades, the fatigue party, the rations and his platoon, as though that were the true life and not the other one in which people were disgusted by lice and dirt. Instead of opening, his mind closed itself against these evident failures of understanding, in an attempt to defend the meaning of his sufferings and the danger to which he was subjected and which he endured without having chosen it, because the "great men" had decided for him.

Visits to the families of acquaintances offered no greater satisfaction. Carlo Salsa describes one such visit:

> Great cordiality and great surprise. Handshakes, what a pleasure, do sit down, tea, cakes.
>
> Then they began listing the privations the war inflicted on them, to which, however, they submitted with lofty patriotism.
>
> They asked me nothing about myself, my soldiers or the events up there.
>
> Only one of the young ladies, seeking an adequate counterpart to her urban sufferings, suddenly remembered to say to me:
>
> "Poor things, how uncomfortable you must be in the trench when it rains!"
>
> "Yes, indeed."
>
> The other young lady intervened with incurable longing:
>
> "What a misfortune not to be men! I wish I could go to war too!"
>
> She then added that she belonged to some committee or other and would have to travel to Udine to deliver clothing for the soldiers. With some concern she asked: "Tell me, is there a danger that

aeroplanes may come to Udine?"

Then a friend entered, in civilian clothes and most thoroughly exempted.

He asked in astonishment:

"What! Not even one medal?"

I was astonished in my turn that he possessed no medal, considering the courage he showed in asking certain questions.

He began to hold forth:

"We know the war better than you do, because from here one can observe its general course, while you can see only the little that lies directly in front of your nose."

He continued:

"What have you to complain about? You, for example, are much more fortunate than I am, because you have lived through the splendid tragedy and are here, like me, unharmed."

I took my leave quickly, promising to return.

Visits to families with no one at the front were a bad business.

Of the many uniforms strolling through the streets, a considerable number belonged to warriors who fought in the cities: in Rome, Milan and Florence. Even the very young men of the 1899 class could be exempted, provided that they were absolutely indispensable specialists and had been employed for at least a year by the company making the request. And the sons of wealthy fathers never lacked "the requesting company". The phenomenon was so common that it was discussed openly in the newspapers. The Tribuna of 19 January 1917 reported this episode:

> A soldier home on leave from the front meets on a tram a fellow officer, a very able man, and asks when he will return to the trench. The other replies brazenly:
>
> "Only fools go to the front. With good connections, I am here in a military office."

Everything exuded hypocrisy. At the People's University a praiseworthy lecture was scheduled: "The Social Function of Pain". At the cinema, an interesting documentary: The Wonders of Science (The Miracles of Artificial Limbs). In the newspapers: "Two gambling dens discovered at Pegli and Nervi: eighty players, including many ladies, caught red-handed." Yet this too was an adventure with a happy ending, since on 19 April 1917 the magistrate at Recco acquitted the concessionaire of the Nervi Municipal Casino "because it had been a private gathering and was therefore not prosecutable".

Dazed and disillusioned, the combatant returned to his hell with the feeling that he had been forgotten up there, fighting for a cause that no one any longer remembered clearly. Meanwhile he was using up the best years of his life. But if he survived! This damned war had to end some day. Pistols and hand grenades were familiar to him: he would use them when he returned.

Our frontier with Austria-Hungary traced a great letter S lying on its side, whose shape had changed only imperceptibly after two years of war. Nothing appears so symmetrical as the letter S. Yet the western curve, held by Austria and facing south, was packed with inaccessible mountains. The other eastern curve, facing north and held by Italy, consisted of the Friulian plain. Consequently, any Austrian

attack, in whatever direction it was launched, immediately threw the deployment of the Italian army into crisis. An attack from the Giudicarie Alps threatened even Milan and northern Italy, although enormous logistical difficulties prevented the Austrians from mounting a major offensive in that direction. An attack from the Trentino salient towards Bassano and Venice risked cutting off the armies deployed on the Isonzo; an offensive from the Lower Isonzo towards Cadore achieved the same result.

The Italian strategic problem was much more difficult. By breaking through the high mountain chains of southern Tyrol or those extending north of Carnia, the Italian army would have ventured into regions that were even more inaccessible and mountainous. In any case, the technical means required to operate with large forces in such regions did not exist. The suggestion, made by many with hindsight, of cutting off the Trentino salient and conquering Trento, or better Bolzano, or better still Franzenfeste (Fortezza), would not have altered the terms of the problem. There remained, therefore, the Isonzo front, which added to the modest advantage of offering a political objective - Trieste - the more substantial advantage of touching the only section of the frontier to which the Austro-Hungarian Empire showed a certain sensitivity. Yet here too the difficulties of the terrain were far from negligible.

Monte Rombon formed the pivot around which our front turned, changing from an east-west orientation to a north-south one. The trenches, running a little below the summit, descended to the floor of the Isonzo valley east of Plezzo. They climbed again along the ridge of Monte Nero and Monte Rosso and the western slopes of Mrzli and Sleme, whose summits were in Austrian hands, until they looked down once more upon the Isonzo at Gabrie. Leaving Tolmino in enemy hands, the Italian lines began again at Volzana and, describing a concave arc in front of Monte Jeza, touched the riverbanks once more a little north of Doblar. The Isonzo marked the battle line as far as Salcano, apart from the small Italian bridgehead at Piava. From Salcano, finally leaving the Isonzo behind, the lines passed below San Marco, across Dosso Faiti and reached the Adriatic one kilometre east of Monfalcone.

From Tolmino to the sea the Italian army faced the Karst: the northern Karst, more commonly known as the Bainsizza plateau, as far as Gorizia, and the Karst proper from Gorizia to the sea. The Karst: a rocky and arid plateau whose dominant colours are the white of limestone and the red of clay, mingled here and there in spring with the green of grass. It is entirely perforated by funnel-shaped doline that plunge steeply into the earth's crust, providing shelter, dwelling and strongpoint for hundreds of thousands of soldiers.

> One seems to be witnessing something primordial, as though the monstrous and violent inner layers of the earth had risen to the surface, shaking off the covering of soil. The damp, soft fertility of living flesh has been torn away and flayed: now the bony framework lies motionless and white. Like an enormous geological skeleton, the Karst stretches beneath the sun.

Thus it was described by a man who greatly loved the land of the Karst: Scipio Slataper. He fell on Podgora, together with many others, in December 1915.

The deployment of the Italian army followed the requirements of this almost compulsory arrangement. At the beginning of spring 1917, one army corps held the long frontier between the Stelvio and Lake Garda; an army, the First, was deployed from Garda to the Asiago plateau, while another, the Sixth, was being formed for the offensive operation that culminated in the Battle of Ortigara. Farther north, the Fourth Army held Cadore, while the Second Army was deployed between Monte Paralba and Tolmino. The bulk of the army, the Gorizia Zone and the Third Army, was deployed along the ninety kilometres between Tolmino and the Adriatic: twenty-eight divisions in all, besides several divisions held in reserve by the Supreme Command. Two-thirds of the army were therefore concentrated on one-sixth of the front, at the bottom of the cul-de-sac formed by the Friulian plain.

The situation was hardly cheerful, and was acceptable only because half of the Austro-Hungarian army was engaged on the Russian-Romanian front. But disturbances were already being reported in Petrograd...

Generals and senior officers had been created with sufficient speed to assume command of this plethora of units. For many regular officers, indeed, the true battlefront was the Military Yearbook; they formed the group of "war industrialists, detached section at the front". Yet together with rapid promotions had come lightning-fast dismissals, on such a scale as to inspire compositions of this kind:

> One fool has departed,
> one fool has arrived;
> he will be torpedoed
> without pity.

After countless years of peace, disturbed only by a few colonial wars - very insensitive thermometers for measuring the ability of commanders - the World War had exposed every defect that can flourish in an organism never put to the test. Generals reputed to be good fathers to their soldiers, learned teachers of military strategy, hard and combative temperaments, or weak and uncertain commanders: all had failed equally as slaughterers of their men. Many dismissals were dictated, moreover, by dislike, envy or spite.

From the beginning of the war to the end of October 1917, the senior officers dismissed amounted to the impressive total of 217 generals, 255 colonels and 335 battalion commanders. Cadorna personally dismissed only about ten officers - but what would have happened if each man had dismissed ten of his subordinates? He was nevertheless accused of accepting blindly the proposals for dismissal submitted by lower commands. One colonel was dismissed because he spoke with too marked a Neapolitan accent; one general because, being plump and ruddy, he appeared incapable of enjoying the necessary prestige.

In Cadorna's defence, it must be said that he generally gave abundant reasons for his proposals to relieve officers. Since these concerned the highest military hierarchy, they were little less than critical essays on the work and character of the men to be sacrificed. Certainly, when General Cadorna includes among the charges supporting the proposed removal of the first commander of the Fourth Army, General Nava, the following telegram sent by Nava to a subordinate command, one can only agree with him - indeed, one wonders how such a man had risen so high:

> Belluno, 15 June 1915
>
> I Army Corps Command
>
> 3318. I have taken note of the communication made to me by today's telephone message concerning the operation undertaken by General Ferrero towards Forcella Dignas and beyond, observing as a general principle that the suggestion expressed concerning the desirability of carrying out the said operation and the request for my opinion upon it do not imply any responsibility on my part. My responsibility begins only when, after the preliminary procedures have been completed and the requested opinion received, I issue a precise order for execution.
>
> General Nava

Before being dismissed, Nava had had time to arrange the dismissal of both army-corps commanders under him, those of I and IX Corps.

Even though it was normal practice to give extensive reasons for proposals of removal, the person concerned usually knew nothing of them. The communication reached him in the sharpest form: "You will hand over command to So-and-so, your successor." And the successor was already on the spot.

In the matter of dismissals, we were surpassed only by the French army, while very few officers were relieved in the German army and relatively few in the Austro-Hungarian army. The Commission of Inquiry into Caporetto, deploring the grave harm caused by repeated removals - harm summarised as "distrust, apprehension, disturbance and discouragement" - discovered that "certain gentlemen generals also appeared before the Commission to deplore the system, although they had hardly been known for moderation in applying it while General Cadorna was in the ascendant". Even after Cadorna's removal, however, dismissals continued to claim victims.

Emanuele Filiberto, Duke of Aosta, commanded the Third Army, the army of the Karst. A rather handsome and imposing man, cousin and contemporary of the King, he had held command from the first day of the war, replacing General Zuccari, who had been dismissed ante litteram on 20 May 1915.

Like all princes of the royal house, Emanuele Filiberto, commissioned as a second lieutenant from the Military Academy in 1887, had then followed a dizzying career, reaching the rank of captain at twenty-one, colonel at twenty-five and general at twenty-nine. Tradition required princes and dukes to be promoted regardless of merit, although in wartime they, like other commanders, were entrusted with responsibility for directing so many human lives well. Great hopes were therefore placed in the invisible but ever-present chiefs of staff.

In his youth and early maturity, the Duke worked hard at women and horses, in accordance with the D'Annunzian ethic, paying little attention to military science or to Italian grammar and syntax, about which he always remained very uncertain.

After the war, the official panegyrists took possession of the Duke of Aosta. Many fine things were therefore said of him. One hagiographer relates:

> Everyone felt the charm of his noble soul, always ready for every act of generosity. Hence the deeply affectionate popularity he enjoyed among all his subordinates, who were constantly ready to sacrifice their lives...
>
> Until then he had never been an orator. But the war revealed him to himself and to others. The grandeur of the sacrifice and the vastness of the task brought his speech to life and made him a warm and effective speaker. With abrupt, imperious and cutting phrases, he knew how to touch the soldier's soul profoundly, spurring him to duty for love of the distant family that must be proud of the absent man, for love of the endangered Fatherland, and for love of the dead comrades who must be avenged. These were most sensitive strings, made still more effective by his exceedingly noble appearance: tall in stature, his facial features severe yet always serene, his gesture measured but energetic, his bearing gentlemanly, his voice clear and resonant, and goodness always visible behind the keen gaze of his very lively eyes.
>
> Thus he was a soldier and commander in the highest sense of the word, a worthy heir to the great name of the strongest warriors of his House.

Another eulogist - although was he truly one, or was this ferocious satire? - did not hesitate to write of the Duke of Aosta:

> The man who with his heart stimulates, sustains, raises and exalts the mighty phalanxes.
>
> With wisdom he presses and envelops them upon thorns, blades and red-hot iron; with daring and impetus he hurls them against sheaves of lead and steel, against flaming projectiles.
>
> He covers, masters and drowns the torrents of fire from the enemy volcano, transfusing into millions of armed men the soul, the passion, the delirium and the fascination of the Titan.

His speeches, although well delivered, sometimes lacked a certain logic:

> "The certainty of victory is within me," he told the soldiers at the beginning of the war, "because what is in your commanders is in you."

The shadow of doubt must nevertheless have touched him from time to time, for when speaking to a visitor to whom he was trying to explain the nature of the war being fought, he said:

> If you could see what life in the trench is like: the hardships, the cold, the mud and, most terrible of all, living among the dead!... Many times, when death threatens and I am there with my officers, I say to myself: it is natural that I and these men, who possess traditions and culture, should be prepared to die. Bullets and shells pass; we raise a hand to our helmets and say: here I am, I am here. But our soldiers - by what marvellous innate virtue are they capable of dying in this way?

That was a good question. To make the answer easier, he strove to indoctrinate the soldiers. While Deputy Barzilai was visiting him, a disabled veteran asked to see the Duke and salute him. After dismissing the man, Emanuele Filiberto turned to Barzilai and said:

- You see, that man was an undisciplined soldier, a subversive, a rebel. I sent him to reform himself in the very front lines, and he came back with one leg missing. Now that he has been discharged, he has come to thank me because I taught him to do his duty.

The soldier's private opinion was not, however, entered in the minutes.

The man under whose orders the Duke served, General Cadorna, had "nothing but good to say" of him. "A true gentleman, worthy of his house. The change produced in him by the war is enormous; to anyone who knew him in Naples, he is no longer the same man. There he was a womaniser and lazy; here he has changed completely." Cadorna nevertheless complained that the Duke of Aosta had not received sufficiently profound military instruction, which prevented him from being a good commander. The Chief of the General Staff also thought him guilty of optimism and related by way of example:

> During the operations of May 1917, on 22 or 23 May, matters at Hermada appeared to be going extremely well. The Duke was radiant, but I saw in the soldiers the uncertainty of which I have spoken on other occasions. The Duke of Aosta said to me: "Your Excellency, tomorrow we shall take Hermada." I replied: "Your Highness, I hope so, but I believe it will be a great deal if we have moved a few hundred metres closer; as for taking it, that is another matter." His Highness was offended and remained rather cold throughout the evening. Unfortunately, Hermada was taken neither the next day nor ever; this did not prevent the Duke from remaining optimistic and seeing in every new operation the certainty of conquering Hermada.

More serious is a specific accusation made by Cadorna against the commander of the Third Army:

> Since the Commission [of Inquiry into Caporetto] regards the matter of executions as one of the principal indications of bad government of men, and constantly censures the bad government of the Second Army while rightly praising the good government of other armies, I must say that if it had published the statistics of executions divided by army, it would have emerged that, in proportion to its strength, the number of executions was not greatest in the Second Army.

Cadorna's allusion can only refer to the Third Army. This shows that D'Annunzio's "engraved" motto was only partly true: "The Third Army is a religious rule like that of the Knights of Saint John." The rule of the Knights of Saint John did not, in any case, prevent the Duke from issuing circulars such as this one, distributed on 1 November 1916:

> I approved that, in the units which unfortunately stained themselves with so grave a dishonour, certain men, guilty or not, should immediately be shot...

General Caviglia, who had first served under the Duke as a brigade commander and later became his colleague as commander of the Eighth Army, shared Cadorna's judgement in much harsher terms. As a prince, Emanuele Filiberto was "affable, courteous, interested, mercenary" and "did not count". According to Caviglia, "the Third Army, commanded by a prince, cost many thousands more men than if it had been commanded by a responsible general". "It would have been a great advantage if the Duke of Aosta had been removed," because "irresponsible princes are a serious calamity". Several years after the war, having been shown a newspaper article from 1920 - when, with one's back covered, it was still possible to say certain things - in which the Duke was called a "scoundrel", Caviglia merely deplored the excessively boorish tone, "although it was right in substance".

According to the King, finally, the Duke of Aosta possessed no science of generalship, tout court, so that the man who actually commanded was the Chief of Staff.

It is therefore no surprise, on these foundations, that Emanuele Filiberto, Duke of Aosta, ended up as president of the National After-Work Organisation.

General Capello was of a very different temper and personality. Luigi Capello, who as commander of VI Army Corps had captured Gorizia in August 1916, had then been "exiled" by Cadorna to XXII and subsequently V Army Corps, deployed along the Trentino front. His removal had been caused by a suspicion, not entirely unfounded, that Capello was aiming - or was the instrument of people aiming - to replace Cadorna in command of the army. At the end of March 1917, however, Cadorna himself recalled his ambitious subordinate, entrusting him with the highly important command of the Gorizia Zone, which despite its rather colourless name was a large army of twelve divisions. A few months later, when the Gorizia Zone was abolished, Capello found himself in command of the largest Italian army, the Second, with a strength of 800,000 men.

Capello, born in 1859 and thus ten years older than the Duke of Aosta and nine years younger than the Supreme Commander, had not enjoyed a career as easy as Emanuele Filiberto's. Coming from a middle-class family, he did not possess the "obligatory good fortune" characteristic of princes of the blood. Commissioned as a second lieutenant from the Military Academy in 1878, he became a brigadier general at the age of fifty-two and fought at Derna in that rank, relieving it from the siege maintained by Enver Bey with a small but very daring band of Bedouins. There, together with a certain reputation for his abilities as a commander, he also acquired his first fame as a "butcher" and "bloodthirsty man".

Luigi Capello was already a divisional commander at the beginning of the war. His career had therefore not been enormously brilliant when, within a year and a half, he obtained command of an army. He had simply reached the ceiling and could rise no further without breaking through the roof.

Opinions of him - unlike those of his colleague commanding the Third Army - are unanimous. Friends and enemies alike regarded him as a man of exceptional intelligence, a skilful and capable dominant personality. Even the Commission of Inquiry into Caporetto, which severely censured his conduct, levelled essentially general accusations against him, while on its only specific point, the deployment of VII Army Corps, it lavished extensive praise.

In 1917 Luigi Capello was a huge, heavily built man, conscious of his excessive dimensions and inclined, in order to correct them, to consume not only his own strength but that of his soldiers as well. Among the many judgements expressed by those who knew him, those of Ardengo Soffici and Luigi Albertini are particularly interesting.

Soffici, an enthusiastic combatant, met him for the first time on the eve of the Battle of the Bainsizza and immediately found him agreeable. Seen at close quarters, especially from below, the General was a good companion who told jokes in Piedmontese and loved hearing them in every dialect of Italy. Ready

to smile at the young junior officers' attempts at humour, he knew how to win their sympathy within a few moments. "The evening of our meeting," Soffici notes, "ended in a spreading gaiety, perhaps excessive." Capello was by now "in full swing" and gave himself up "with so complete a cordiality that I was struck to find in him the childlike foundation peculiar to truly brilliant men".

He joked about his own modesty, his corpulence, the weight of his fat and his formidable responsibilities:

- Just think, gentlemen: this elephant who is laughing and clowning here has twenty-nine divisions on his back.

This shows how his elephantiasis, upon which he insisted so greatly, weighed upon him and could be justified psychologically only by the many divisions.

- One sad thing is when I see the collar patches of new regiments and have to confess that I did not know they belonged to me, the General continued.

Ardengo Soffici, now won over by his good nature, jokingly asked whether he did not possess a strength return.

- I had one, he replied, but then I realised that it was too difficult to keep it up to date. Generals who were present in the morning had been torpedoed by evening.

It was rather as though Henry VIII had chatted with his sixth wife about the first five whom he had beheaded, for Capello, despite his many merits, suffered from a certain "mania for torpedoing".

This mask of the "likeable fellow", observed with some reservations by an intelligent and relatively young lieutenant, must be compared with the charge made against Capello by the Commission of Inquiry: that in the Second Army, "by personal systems of coercion which sometimes went as far as harassment, he aggravated the effects of General Cadorna's methods of government and... helped to bring about the depression of the troops' spirit".

Unlike the Duke of Aosta, who read speeches written by others, Capello knew how to wield a pen. His many publications, especially those on the conflict and the part he played in it - Per la verita and Note di guerra - reveal the gifts of a writer and brilliant polemicist. He is undoubtedly one of the authors most frequently quoted for his acute and intelligent observations. His writings, however, also mirror his character: a pleasant but slightly tortuous style; a considerable critical ability and always an attempt to offer alternatives to the plans and operational designs he criticised; but also a tendency to cheat in this exercise by proposing apparently simple solutions rich in hidden defects.

Senator Albertini, editor of the Corriere della Sera and naturally more worldly-wise than Ardengo Soffici, recognised this aspect of his character:

> From the beginning I felt a certain instinctive distrust of the man, who appeared to me murky, restless and concerned chiefly with his own personal success... He aimed to serve the cause of the war and his own at the same time, without too many scruples. Strong, dominant by temperament, cunning and extremely active, he knew how to ask and obtain... To get ahead was his programme: ahead with his troops and to the summit of the hierarchy in his career...

Capello demanded a great deal of the troops, both in combat and during periods of so-called rest. Among other things, the Commission of Inquiry records a terrible invective, descending to insults and threats, which Capello is said to have addressed during the Battle of the Bainsizza to a decimated company of Alpini guilty of failing to capture an enemy strongpoint. According to his best defender - Capello himself - it was instead a "paternal reprimand" addressed by one Alpino, as he originally was, to other Alpini.

Earlier, according to another anonymous accuser, Capello had mocked with truculent satisfaction the purest sentiment of the Grenadiers, affection for their fallen comrades. The episode dates from the end of 1915, when the brigade commanded by General Pennella was ordered to replace another infantry brigade in the defence of the "white sheet" of Oslavia. This macabre site had been used a few months earlier by the same Grenadiers as a cemetery for comrades killed in previous attacks. As the area had again approached the battlefront through the changing fortunes of war, the Grenadiers would have had to dig their trenches among the graves and skeletons of their old dead, among whom they would have to live - and did live - for many months.

Capello is said to have "sneered" at Pennella's request that his brigade be spared so painful a duty, seeing it as evidence of cowardice. The order naturally took its course. In this case too, Capello's version is substantially the same, apart from the "sneer". The infantry brigade had to be withdrawn from the front; the order had already been given, and other soldiers could not be sacrificed out of consideration for the Grenadiers.

The quotations could continue indefinitely, since every ugly incident attributed to Capello has two versions. Those who knew him personally were generally dominated by his personality; those who experienced him through the orders he issued and signed accumulated an immense and repressed hatred.

As for the treatment of troops during rest periods, he flooded subordinate commands with circulars reminding them of the need to alternate training with rest. More conscious than anyone else of the cultural inferiority, and therefore the inadequate preparation, of our troops, he hoped to instruct them during the few weeks available between one offensive and another. He failed to achieve his purpose but easily succeeded in being misunderstood. It was natural, moreover, that a man who recommended:

> Let the men rest as much as necessary so that their physical condition may be maintained at the best possible level, but also require that the training be carried out as I intend it to be carried out.

should find zealous subordinates who tormented soldiers and officers. In the Second Army the conviction therefore spread that its commander wished to make the troops prefer returning to the trench over remaining at rest.

Cadorna held a high opinion of his subordinate and expressed it both in his writings and in conversation with others. Capello had to be controlled, but "possessed great military qualities and a powerful brain... [he had the] ability to organise offensives [and to] use great masses of artillery". This judgement is all the more remarkable because Capello was a Freemason and an atheist, while Cadorna was an observant Catholic. Father Semeria, the intriguing Barnabite chaplain at the Supreme Command, indeed helped - or at least claimed to have helped - bring Cadorna and Capello together again during 1916, after the shadows that followed the capture of Gorizia.

This suggests a considerable degree of mutual esteem, unless one wishes to attach a sinister meaning to General Vigano's insinuations. He referred to "the Catholic faith practised with bigotry and the opposite faith, Freemasonry, reduced to secret and sinister understandings", adding sibyllinely that "Catholic bigotry and Masonic free thought were also seen to come to an agreement in order to reconcile personal interests".

Of all our army commanders, Capello was by far the best, the one most animated by initiative and endowed with notable insight and intuition, as he also demonstrated at Caporetto. His fault was wishing to conduct the war in the only way in which it could be conducted: with extreme cruelty. He was intelligent, with a few eccentricities, but he was not cunning. The fact that he surrendered his old age to the life imprisonment imposed upon him by Fascism, which he had joined from its earliest hour, shows that he was not the skilful profiteer many insinuated him to be. His conscience, which had allowed him

without emotion to order hundreds of thousands of men to attack, many of whom remained on the field, placed rather narrow limits on his capacity for compromise.

In the Italy of the "cunning", he certainly deserves no place of honour.

And then there was Lieutenant General Luigi Cadorna, Chief of the General Staff of the Army - in simpler words, Supreme Commander of the Italian Army.

Like Capello, he had advanced through his career in small stages, not in the seven-league boots possessed by the Duke of Aosta. Indeed, they became generals together, although Emanuele Filiberto was nineteen years younger.

Although he often liked to speak of Napoleon or Moltke, Cadorna felt more at ease in the role of a proconsul required to answer for his actions before the Roman Senate. Nothing was further from his spirit than the idea of arousing enthusiasm among the troops or of identifying himself with them before the Government. He felt himself delegated to command by a higher authority, not a captain of fortune begging a miserly and reluctant lord on behalf of himself and his men. In his subordinates, moreover, he expected to see reflections of himself descending the entire hierarchical ladder to the ordinary soldier, conceived as a little Cadorna.

This particular cast of mind, while making him inclined to self-criticism, made him suspicious of criticism from outside, since he tended to confuse it with attacks upon his authority. Such an attitude was encouraged by a natural shyness that left him uncomfortable before new people and things. His behaviour was therefore easily mistaken for arrogance or haughtiness, for a desire for autocratic power within and beyond his responsibilities.

Shyness and pride made him a rather difficult interlocutor, all the more because to these aspects of character he added a broad general culture and an unusual ability to express his ideas clearly. An excellent writer - in this respect greatly superior even to Capello - he possessed, as few did, the gift of condensing complicated concepts into a few words. It was therefore difficult to catch him contradicting himself or to bend his inner conviction.

When war broke out, General Cadorna, now sixty-four, was close to retirement. Only the sudden death from a heart attack of the serving Chief of the General Staff, General Pollio, had abruptly projected him into the centre of the hurricane. He assumed office on 27 July 1914, the day before the first declaration of war. He was virtually unknown to the politicians, who believed him an ordinary general, a man who would do his best.

> "As soon as he began to display his iron will," Angelo Gatti writes, "they all turned against him and sought in every way to overthrow him. Had they known where that will of Cadorna's would lead, and what lay behind his words, perhaps they would not have made war after all."

There was a continuous procession of deputies, senators and ministers to the Supreme Command. Very often they had the unpleasant surprise of being told that the Generalissimo was absent or occupied elsewhere and found themselves entrusted to less important escorts. This helped increase Cadorna's reputation as a solitary and haughty man, if not intractable and violent. It was said that discussion with him was impossible, that he accepted no opinions but his own, stubborn to the point of obstinacy, hard to the point of cruelty and cold to the point of insensibility.

That Cadorna was not, however, as impervious to discussion as his opponents wished others to believe is proved by many facts. Some, admittedly, were reported by friends and admirers, but others by people who were not known for tenderness towards him. Among the latter was General Bertotti, commander of the expeditionary force in Albania in 1915-16, an expedition to which Cadorna had been deeply hostile.

Bertotti reports a long conversation between his chief of staff, Lieutenant Colonel Mola, and the General, in which the latter appears far from incapable of persuasion.

Cadorna enjoyed excellent relations with Luigi Albertini, which is easily explained because the editor of the Corriere della Sera inspired his newspaper to follow the conduct Cadorna desired. But he was also on good terms with Olindo Malagodi, editor of the Tribuna, whose pro-Giolittian tendencies could not have won the Chief's sympathy to the same degree. Albertini therefore seems right when he states that Cadorna was not so much intransigent as many of those around him were timid and cowardly. Many men in government also lacked the courage to speak to him, "which - it is perfectly true - had grave disadvantages".

The zeal of his apologists greatly harmed Cadorna. Believing they were helping their idol, they suitably distorted the facts. One of them, Colonel Varo Varanini, relates an episode from Cadorna's career as follows:

> When certain disagreements arose between Generals Pollio and Cadorna over the question of the defence of Genoa and the solution to be adopted, the Prime Minister of the time, the Honourable Giolitti, considered it advisable to convene the Defence Commission. Giolitti, who had never met Cadorna, was astonished to hear him speak for several hours, quoting data and figures from memory with marvellous clarity, to such an extent that even laymen in military matters could understand the question. The Commission accepted and adopted General Cadorna's lucid ideas.

The Genoa affair was old, dating back to the beginning of the century, when, in Giolitti's own words:

> A passage had to be opened for a tramway between Genoa and Sampierdarena; and Pedotti, the Minister of War, came to the Council of Ministers with a General Staff project requiring two million lire to fortify it. As though Genoa could be defended once the enemy was at Sampierdarena! I sent him packing...!

The plan to fortify Genoa was not buried, but merely set aside. Several years later General Pollio returned to the attack within the Supreme Defence Commission, arguing for the desirability of preserving and strengthening the city's fortifications, which others proposed destroying. Giolitti adopted Cadorna's view in favour of demolishing them, which would have given Genoa the advantage of being an open city. But as for the impression Cadorna made upon Giolitti:

> From my contacts with him I always judged him to possess mediocre intelligence. When the new Chief of the General Staff had to be appointed [in 1908], the candidates were he and Pollio; and I told the King: I do not know Pollio, but I prefer him to Cadorna, whom I do know [5]. Only once did I praise Cadorna, and in this way: when a General Military Council had to pass judgement on the ability of our generals, I said there was only Pollio, and after him Cadorna. But I added that I did not mean this as great praise, because all the others were below zero...

The fact was that a genuine mutual repugnance existed between Cadorna and Giolitti. Their minds operated in different fields and did not complement one another at all.

Because of the office he held during the war, Cadorna had to make many decisions and, as happens to anyone who acts greatly, he often made mistakes. He was also accustomed to deciding alone and assuming the entire responsibility, which he did not wish to share with others: never a council of war, even when its convening was requested by the Prime Minister himself, as happened with Salandra. Ready to command or obey, he was unwilling to divide command. His position was therefore highly exposed, and it was extremely easy to trace back to him responsibility for everything that occurred. It was natural that a conflict of opinion should rage around his personality and extend beyond reasonable limits.

Colonel Douhet, for example, the well-known and excitable pioneer of strategic aviation, regarded Cadorna as a criminal whose head was not worth the petrol consumed by the aeroplanes taking off to defend him against air raids. In this, however, Douhet was merely applying to Cadorna the law he had formulated: "stupidity is proportional to the square of age and the cube of rank". To General Marassi, who was a deputy and had commanded a division under Capello, the Chief of the General Staff was an example of intellectual immobility. According to General Vigano - another Minister of War in one of Giolitti's many governments - what Cadorna lacked instead, for it was difficult to satisfy everyone, was spiritual balance.

Enemy generals, Austrian and German, were much more unanimous than the Allied commanders in judging their opponent's personality favourably. Likewise, foreign politicians were much more favourable towards the General than our own politicians. Wickham Steed, who directed The Times in those years, writes:

> After the disaster of October 1917 at Caporetto it became fashionable to criticise General Cadorna and the work of the Italian army during his period of command. What I can say is that Cadorna made upon both me and [Lord] Northcliffe the impression of a solid and virile mind, and certainly one not inferior in intellectual and moral fibre to any of the Allied commanders we had known.

Of all the portraits of the General, the most celebrated is that by Marshal Caviglia. But since it appeared in a work published when Fascism was at the height of its splendour, and Fascism after some hesitation became pro-Cadorna, it is perhaps more interesting to repeat what Caviglia wrote in his memoirs, published after the end of the Second World War:

> He was a man of strong will and exceedingly strong character. I think of one of those rocks rising along the coast of the Ligurian Sea, against which the fury of storms breaks in vain.

To Ernest Hemingway, who mentions him in A Farewell to Arms, General Cadorna was "fat and prosperous". This proves that Hemingway had not even seen him in a photograph, because at no period of his life was Cadorna fat and prosperous. Cadorna was not tall and had a heavy frame. His head was large, his face hollow, his jaws those of a mastiff. His eyes were two oblique slits; parallel to the eyes were the eyebrows, and to these the downward slopes of his moustache. With a barbaric helmet on his head, he would have been an ancient Lombard king. The former military attache at the Viennese embassy in Rome also compared him to a Lombard.

But a Lombard did not have an easy life in a Byzantinising Italy that viewed the provincial administration building in Udine, where the Supreme Command had its headquarters, with greater suspicion than the chancelleries of Vienna and Berlin. Cadorna returned the antipathy and appeared to fear Rome more than Conrad von Hotzendorf or Arz von Straussenburg.

As long as Salandra remained in power, the Chief of the General Staff had been forced to discuss and quarrel with him. But once Boselli became Prime Minister - a senile old man who had to receive injections of camphor before speaking in public or attending an international meeting, a figure whom Gaetano Salvemini called a "decrepit and inconclusive rhetorician" - the dialogue, or rather the dispute, shifted to Cadorna and the Minister of the Interior, Vittorio Emanuele Orlando.

Orlando became Minister of Justice in November 1914, when Salandra had to resolve the small crisis caused by the death of the Foreign Minister, the Marquis of San Giuliano, who was succeeded by Sidney Sonnino.

Orlando had not been satisfied with the offer of the Justice portfolio. He had already held that office under Giolitti in 1907-09 and felt like a pupil repeating a school year. He therefore expressed to Salandra his desire to move to a more important ministry. Salandra found words to console him: the

country was moving towards war, and the Minister of Justice could hope to be the Keeper of the Seals who would extend Italian legislation to the liberated lands. The argument pleased Orlando, who contented himself with it.

But instead of the end of the war came Salandra's fall. In the new national ministry, Orlando finally obtained promotion to Minister of the Interior and the pleasure of following the stations of the cross in his relations with Cadorna.

There was no complete incompatibility of character between Cadorna and Orlando. Confiding in Colonel Gatti during his short stay at Versailles with the Inter-Allied Military Committee between the end of 1917 and the beginning of 1918, the General said:

> I do not believe that we are fundamentally antipathetic to one another. It is not as with Nitti and Alfieri, whom I could never bear to see. No, I believe Orlando has esteem and not antipathy for me. But Orlando is ambitious and weak, and therefore cowardly. Having reached the highest rung of power [Orlando was then Prime Minister], if he possessed a different spirit he could act according to his intelligence and conscience, which are strong. But he does not possess that spirit. What a pity!

Reality, however, counted for much more than this crumb of mutual sympathy. The repercussions on the home front of the war being fought were so imposing that they brought the Supreme Command and the Ministry of the Interior into continual contact - and continual conflict.

Like most interventionist politicians, Orlando believed that he had performed his act of courage at the moment of the declaration of war. After that, neither domestic nor foreign policy should continue to exist until the day of inevitable victory. The achievement of that inevitable victory was the generals' responsibility. But the generals could not bring themselves to win, and while everyone waited, everything became more complicated. The political configuration of the world was changing. Other forces were beginning to emerge and assert themselves: the United States and distant Japan. Even in blood-drained old Europe, rulers felt that the peoples were slipping from their grasp. No, being Minister of the Interior in 1917 was certainly not a comfortable profession. It was made more difficult by generals who killed their soldiers instead of preserving them for the final battle.

Everyone had his own theories on how to escape from the thicket. In the Entente camp, Winston Churchill had shown the greatest imagination and willingness to use it on both the strategic and tactical levels, employing his authority as First Lord of the Admiralty for as long as he possessed it. On the strategic level there had been the Dardanelles: an important undertaking, but so badly conducted - through no fault of Churchill's - that everything ended in catastrophic slaughter and a prudent withdrawal. On the tactical level, Winston Churchill had been impressed by the possibilities of the armoured fighting vehicle and, with little connection to the office he held, had begun subsidising research and experimental construction of these devices, hypocritically and falsely called "land ships".

In November 1917, using large groups of tanks for the first time - about four hundred - on suitable ground, the British succeeded in locally breaking through the German front before Cambrai. Because of the lack of reserves, the victory produced no result and was followed by a rapid German counter-offensive, also local in character, which cancelled almost all the advantages gained by the British. Commenting many years later on the Battle of Cambrai, Winston Churchill wondered whether such a battle could not have been fought a year earlier, or at the latest in the spring of 1917. Indeed, not one battle, but a coordinated series of three or four breakthrough battles that would have overwhelmed the German front over a stretch of about eighty kilometres. Would it have been possible by spring 1917 to accumulate a mass of three thousand tanks with the necessary crews and indispensable services? Churchill answered this and other questions as follows:

> One tenth of the mental effort expended by the staffs in preparing the offensives of the old type of which the war had hitherto consisted; one twentieth of the influence they exerted in pressing reluctant Governments to approve those offensives; one hundredth of the men consumed in them - these would easily and decisively have solved every problem by the spring of 1917...
>
> When I condemn without exception all the great Allied offensives of 1915, 1916 and 1917 as useless and mistaken operations of extremely high cost, I am compelled to answer the question: what else could have been done? And I answer by pointing to the Battle of Cambrai: this could have been done. This, in many variations and on a larger and better scale, should and could have been done if the generals had not contented themselves with fighting machine guns with the breasts of brave men, believing that this alone meant conducting a war.

But in 1916-17 Churchill was no longer in the Government. He too had been swallowed by the French front and, with the rank of lieutenant colonel, commanded the 6th Battalion of the Scottish Rifles in order to conduct the "war of attrition" that so disgusted him.

Lloyd George, whose technical imagination was less than that of his younger former colleague, had no equally precise ideas about the employment of the armoured weapon and other innovations. His influence was therefore exercised in the strategic field - with little success, as we have seen, when he attempted to transfer the principal Allied effort to Italy in 1917.

In Italy we had no Churchill. Instead, we had Colonel Douhet and Minister Orlando.

Colonel Douhet had a technical solution ready. The war would be won in the air, while on land the only thing to do was adopt the defensive, since a man defending himself with a machine gun was worth, according to his theory, ten or a hundred attacking men. Strategic aviation should instead be developed: if two or three hundred aeroplanes had bombed Constantinople, the Dardanelles would have been taken almost without a shot. Douhet's proposed solution was considerably ahead of its time. What the Anglo-Saxon powers barely managed twenty-five years later against Germany in the Second World War could certainly not have resolved the Italian war in 1917.

And there remained Orlando's theory: a tactical and strategic theory of extreme simplicity. But let Orlando himself speak:

> For this reason, if I were absolutely compelled to answer the question, "What would you have done instead of those offensives which you condemn?", I could confine myself to replying: I would not have undertaken those offensives.

Between a Chief of the General Staff who wanted to wage the war and a minister who wanted to wage it without waging it, disagreement could scarcely have been more complete. Opinions were, however, equally discordant within the Government itself. When the Prime Minister met Cadorna's daughter in the spring of 1917, he urged her - astonishingly - to tell her father "to give us a victory". On 26 April of the same year Bissolati wrote anxiously to Lieutenant Gallarati Scotti, the Chief of the General Staff's aide-de-camp, asking for the approximate date of the next offensive "in order to silence anxieties and impatience".

Had General Cadorna been the sort of man to accept advice, he would not have lacked advisers on the best way of conducting the war. There was nevertheless good reason to doubt the merits of their conflicting prescriptions. Cadorna was therefore alone in deciding what should be done. And he had one fixed idea: to attack on the Isonzo.

A thin, slight, middle-aged little man continually travelled the front, backwards and forwards without rest: the King. He watched, inspected, took many photographs, spoke little, and then went away. It had been so from the beginning of the war and would remain so until the end.

He was informed of everything, both through the daily report made to him by Colonel Pintor, sent by the Supreme Command, and through his continual contact with the army. No other monarch or head of state submitted himself to so monotonous and uncomfortable a life. It was a voluntary exile lasting several years, interrupted only by leave which the King granted himself in no greater measure than that due to other servicemen, or by the need to travel to Rome when, much to his disgust, reasons of state required his presence.

His conduct made an impression upon the soldiers. How many had imagined him, in their childlike fancy, with a crown upon his head and an ermine cloak! Yet there he was, always among them, wearing puttees and a bandolier, dressed in grey-green cloth and almost as battered as they were.

In high places his conduct caused perplexity. Cadorna would have liked the King to take a more active part in military affairs and to assist him within the limits of the possible. But he always found a closed door. Did the King act in this way through incapacity? Certainly not, for according to everyone who met him he was cultured and possessed common sense. Through laziness or apathy? Through excessive constitutional scruple? Or perhaps through scepticism? Cadorna favoured the last explanation:

> If Vittorio Emanuele were told that he must go and live outside Italy as a private citizen with his present fortune, he would feel neither surprise nor displeasure.

In January 1917 Olindo Malagodi had an opportunity to make a long visit to the front, from the mouths of the Isonzo to Ala:

> I gathered very varied impressions: of great order and power, like a machine functioning safely and precisely; but from the point of view of morale I was compelled to observe an air of melancholy and weariness, and here and there also irritation and discontent, closed and silent but precisely for that reason more impressive. And there were also a few unpleasant incidents. As our motor car passed - a General Staff vehicle bearing its insignia because we were being driven by a General Staff officer - disrespectful cries rose here and there: "The shirkers!"

Such was the Italian army on the eve of the 1917 campaign: a large and powerful organism, yet already exhausted. Above all psychologically exhausted, before a prospect that seemed to offer no way out.

The new troglodytes lived in the trenches with the feeling that they had been condemned for ever. Fate had decreed that they must fight until death or mutilation. Work, love-making, freedom and security had become forbidden pleasures. The old world of quiet, peace and cheerfulness appeared to have ended for ever. There remained only the poetry of slaughter: "And tomorrow we go over the top..."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Tenth Battle

New Year's Eve 1916 passed sadly but relatively quietly everywhere, except near the mouths of the Danube, where the Romanian defeat was reaching its conclusion. Magicians and astrologers, favoured by the age, had devoted themselves to end-of-year forecasts, promising victory and peace to everyone. Like certain meteorologists, they tried to predict the next day's weather from that of the day before. The clairvoyant "Countess Aurelia" prophesied from Rome that in 1917:

> The star of Italy
> will shine ever more brightly.
> Great inexorable Russia
> will become ever greater.

She was no more unfortunate than the astrologer in Vienna who foretold a long and exceedingly happy life for Emperor Karl, who died of consumption at the age of thirty-five. A momentary rest had also taken possession of the battlefronts. On 1 January 1917 the bulletin of the Italian Supreme Command announced:

> Artillery fighting in Vallarsa, in the Astico valley and on the Julian front. No important event to report.

"Quiet night," the French communiqué specified for the same date.

The Russians reported the capture of several prisoners. The German command mentioned artillery duels in the Ypres salient. At exactly midnight, one British battery chose to celebrate the beginning of the new year by firing seventeen rounds beyond the German lines. It was the only important noise, for the combatants respected one another for several days.

Despite its listless beginning, 1917 nevertheless proved to be the decisive year. The unrestricted submarine campaign declared by the Central Powers, the Russian Revolution and the intervention of the United States of America on the side of the Entente were the three events that, between February and April of that year, determined the future course of the World War.

At the beginning of 1917, not only the military conduct of the war but its political conduct had reached a deadlock on both sides. Three years of propaganda and slaughter had faded the patriotic and national motives for which Frenchmen, Britons, Germans, Austrians, Russians and Italians had been drawn into fighting. The original reasons, simple and popular, had been replaced by others more abstract and less intelligible, referring to concepts of power, economic supremacy, spheres of influence and living space.

President Wilson had added to the confusion when, in his address before the American Senate on 22 January, he spoke of "freedom of the seas", "peace without victory" and the need to establish a "league of nations".

Apart from the fact that these concepts appeared even newer and more abstruse than the preceding ones, the leaders of the Entente unfortunately thought Woodrow Wilson was speaking under the inspiration of the German Chancellor, so little did they like the principles he proposed as possible guides for a negotiated peace. Suspicion of a mild German-American idyll had been strengthened by the American ambassador to Germany, James Watson Gerard. His return to the Kaiser's Government - he had come back from the United States only a month earlier - was celebrated on 9 January with a banquet at the

Berlin Chamber of Commerce. On that occasion Gerard launched into a declaration that "German-American relations had never been so good as at that moment, and there was no reason to doubt that they would remain so as long as men such as State Secretary Zimmermann, Hindenburg, Ludendorff and Admiral von Müller remained at the head of Germany's civil, military and naval administrations". On 27 January Wilson then sent cordial greetings to the Kaiser on his fifty-seventh birthday; by then few people still remembered it. Yet when the German Emperor received them, the irreparable had already occurred.

The Germans themselves, with the coarseness that had distinguished their foreign policy for many years, had relieved the Entente of the furious stammer into which it had fallen. On 31 January the world was informed that unrestricted submarine warfare would begin the following day. Every vessel entering a specified maritime area around the British, French and Italian coasts would do so at its own risk and would be attacked without warning.

The measure and the manner in which it was taken appeared a slap in the face to the American President, who was still engaged in his attempts at mediation. Gerard himself had received no warning whatever. Wilson's reply was immediate: on 3 February the United States broke diplomatic relations with Germany and recalled its ambassador.

For many months the decision on unrestricted submarine warfare - so fatal to Germany - had hung in the balance between the conflicting opinions of the Army High Command and the Government.

Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg's mind was troubled by well-founded doubts about the wisdom of this step, which in his view would cause a serious worsening of relations and perhaps war with the United States. Hindenburg and Ludendorff, however, believed they could not win unless the Allied supply lines were first severed, an aim they thought could be achieved within six months. Britain, the arch-enemy, would then be brought to its knees and all Germany's war aims could easily be achieved. These had been conceived on a generous scale: annexation of Courland and Lithuania, creation of a vassal kingdom in Poland, guarantees in Belgium and along the French frontier, claims upon Dakar, Malta and the Azores, besides the return of the colonies with certain additions. The irrevocable decision, with all those responsible and the Kaiser present, was taken at Pless on 9 January, the same day Gerard delivered his friendly address.

On that occasion Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg made a resigned declaration: having heard the opinion of General Headquarters and the Admiralty, he, the Chancellor, could not oppose unrestricted submarine warfare.

Admiral von Müller, head of the Imperial Naval Cabinet, records in his diary:

> Hoetzendorff [Chief of Staff of the Admiralty] is satisfied with Hindenburg's decision to begin unrestricted submarine warfare at the end of January, provided that a small number of divisions are available for the Danish and Dutch frontiers. Hindenburg and Ludendorff are both of the opinion that our military situation by the end of January will permit us to risk a declaration of war by America. I insisted that in any event this would mean a prolongation of the war. Hoetzendorff agreed at least on that point...

The German military high command was evidently indulging in rosy illusions if it hoped to defeat the Entente without foreseeing the imminent Russian defection and despite American intervention and the threatening attitude of Holland and Denmark. Most German public opinion also greeted the rupture with the United States with arrogant irresponsibility: everything was going for the best, and Gerard's departure had eliminated a clandestine intelligence centre working for the British Government.

The rupture of diplomatic relations between Germany and the United States did not yet mean war, although the two countries were walking along a razor's edge. In the following weeks German statesmen once again proved the Entente's best allies. Their first particularly unpleasant move was to deny exit visas to American citizens resident in Germany whom their Government had invited to return home. The hope was to retain them as "hostages" in order to negotiate the possible return of German shipping seized in American ports - vessels which in any case would have been sunk by the British if they had attempted to force the blockade. Only Gerard's refusal to leave until his fellow citizens had been released caused the Reich authorities to abandon the threat.

Far more disastrous was Zimmermann's brilliant idea of proposing an anti-American alliance to the President of Mexico, promising him Texas, New Mexico and Arizona if he succeeded in detaching Japan from the Entente and inducing it to attack the United States in the Pacific. This example of Weltpolitik for the use of illiterates was condensed into a coded telegram of one hundred words, sent by the State Secretary to the German representative in Mexico City on 19 January 1917, before the rupture of diplomatic relations with the United States. The message was mysteriously intercepted, deciphered and made public in the United States on 4 March.

The astonished German representative therefore had little time to weave his web. Wilson had now been given a solid pretext for declaring war, since Germany was threatening the territorial integrity of the United States itself. Zimmermann's defence of his act was even more clumsy. Prince von Bülow, normally so caustic, describes him in his memoirs as "a man of honour, a patriot and animated by the best intentions". Zimmermann denied nothing and admitted everything, arguing that Germany had the right to take precautions against danger and that in any case the United States would have nothing to fear if it did not declare war.

The newspapers of German immigrants in the United States, which were conducting an active campaign against intervention and had immediately taken the simplest course by maintaining that the message attributed to Zimmermann was a forgery, were left disarmed. The Cincinnati Volksblatt did not hesitate to declare that Zimmermann was an idiot. The Vaterland published the view that if Germany allied itself with the enemies of the United States, so much the worse for Germany, because German-American citizens were Americans first and Germans second.

All these pretexts were an excellent weapon placed in Wilson's hands. His decision to intervene in the conflict had in any case been taken, but its implementation would otherwise have been more difficult and slower. Thus in early April the Entente received the unexpected gift of the United States' declaration of war upon Germany.

The event was greeted with the loudest cries of enthusiasm. The strength of the United States was an unknown quantity, but financial worries were over for the moment. Time would demonstrate the immense power of the American Confederation, which intervened just in time to compensate for Russia's collapse, for revolution had meanwhile broken out there, unexpected although always feared.

In Winston Churchill's soaring prose:

> [Russia], while about to grasp Victory, fell to the ground and was devoured alive by worms, like Herod in the legend. Yet her efforts were not in vain. The mortally wounded giant had time, with the supreme exertion of the dying, to pass the torch across the Ocean to a new Titan, long immersed in doubt, who now rose and began to arm mightily. The Russian Empire fell on 16 March; on 6 April the United States entered the war.

What had been maturing in Russia during the final months had often been the subject of dialectical exercise and psychological speculation.

One fact had become clear: the immense empire which, in the imagination of the Allies, should have acted like a gigantic steamroller, crushing the eastern armies of the Central Powers shoulder to shoulder with the western armies until all were destroyed and annihilated by the combined forces of their opponents, had been very far from fulfilling that task.

The changing fortunes of 1914 had been followed in 1915 by the colossal defeat that began at Gorlice on 2 May and ended in September with the loss of all Russian Poland and Lithuania. Yet the Tsar's half-disarmed army, opposing flesh to iron, had not collapsed. By mobilising the country's meagre industrial capacity and aided by Allied supplies arriving through Archangel, Murmansk and the Trans-Siberian Railway, the Empire had been able to rearm and win Brusilov's fine victories in 1916.

At the beginning of 1917 the Russian armed forces were better equipped than at any earlier moment in the war. The consequences of losing about eight million men were nevertheless being felt. The old army, shield of the autocracy, had been replenished even in its officer cadres with elements drawn from the popular classes and had become a hypertrophied mass highly sensitive to changes of mood among the civilian population.

The Russian army nevertheless bore an immense burden, since ninety German divisions and fifty Austro-Hungarian divisions were immobilised on the Eastern Front, apart from twelve Turkish divisions deployed in the Caucasus. Had the representatives of the Entente been told in March 1917 that the Russian army would disappear from the scene within less than a year, they would all have been paralysed with anguish, because the Eastern Front engaged no fewer enemy divisions than the German divisions opposing the Franco-British armies on the Western Front. Italy's situation was even more delicate, since only forty per cent of the Austro-Hungarian army was deployed against us, while sixty per cent was engaged against Russia and Romania. The collapse of the Eastern Front would therefore allow Austria to reinforce the Italian front in dangerously large proportions and would, for the first time, permit it to pass from the defensive to a sustained offensive.

Italian public opinion was consequently highly sensitive to events in Russia. Yet the Tsar's Empire seemed physically too large to collapse, and people reassuringly recalled that Napoleon too had broken his horns against Russia. Furthermore, news carefully filtered by censorship and compulsory optimism helped preserve unlimited confidence in Russia's power of resistance.

After all, did not the Little Father, amid all the cares of the moment, still find time to devote himself most zealously to his soldiers, personally studying in February 1917 the badges for servicemen who had suffered gas attacks? To emphasise class distinctions, these decorations differed for officers and enlisted men, being gold and silver for the former and red for the latter. If he could find time for such trifles, he could not be burdened by graver anxieties. At the end of January the Tsar himself, always full of solicitude for his subjects, appointed a great commission to study the reconstitution of Poland, which had already been lost. To put an end to German-inspired rumours suggesting the existence of underground revolutionary movements, an official communiqué was issued on 27 February declaring that order reigned supreme and the entire population longed for victory.

Major military operations on the Eastern Front had nevertheless languished for many months, and the Russians had been unwilling or unable to assist Romania, which had miserably collapsed in the late autumn of 1916. Operations continued on a much smaller scale in the wild Caucasus and northern Persia, where the Russians aimed to meet the British, who occupied Baghdad on 11 March and were indeed reached after the revolution had already broken out.

An inter-Allied conference began in Petrograd on 1 February. Italy was represented by Minister Scialoja, Count Aldrovandi Marescotti, General Ruggeri-Laderchi and several experts. The French sent

Minister Doumergue and General Castelnau; the British, Lord Milne, General Wilson and others. The conference lasted about three weeks and was adorned at regular intervals by the usual speeches. It ended in "complete success", having produced "unanimous decisions".

Behind the scenes, however, no unanimity of judgement about what had been seen in Russia had developed among the members of the Allied delegations. This was partly due to the differing opinions held by the permanent representatives of the Allied nations in Russia - ambassadors and military attachés - who influenced the newcomers in various ways.

Our ambassador Carlotti belonged to the optimists, and his optimism appeared both in the dispatches he sent to Rome and in his speeches. According to him, even if revolution broke out, Russia would hold and the steamroller would continue to function admirably, although it had not yet begun. Apart from some initial violence, the establishment of a new regime would encounter no great obstacles.

> He develops this opinion, noted the French ambassador Paléologue, with the ingenious subtlety of the Italian character, which in a political crisis immediately perceives every combination and every possible solution.

The Russian crisis was thus regarded by Marquis Carlotti, and by many others, as an ordinary parliamentary crisis in a Western country, as though the Boselli Cabinet or the ministry headed by Lloyd George were about to be overthrown. These observers were undoubtedly poorly endowed with prophetic vision.

The palm for optimism, however, belongs to General Wilson. He was extremely satisfied with what he saw at the front, where everything appeared "much better" than he had been led to believe. His visit to General Evert, commanding the central group of armies, fifty divisions strong, was "a complete success". "These people grasped very well all the general elements of the situation, from Salonika to President Wilson." The soldiers looked martial and well fed and had a warlike gaze. He therefore considered it his duty to encourage General Castelnau, who, perhaps because he had lost his three sons in the war, did not share such euphoria and was trying to convince the Russians and the others that the Japanese should be induced to send troops to the Western Front - an argument evidently beside the point.

Wilson admitted that Russia had blemishes. The Russians, for example, demanded ten thousand guns from the Allies even though depots along the Trans-Siberian Railway were still cluttered with matériel sent the previous year and never delivered to its destination; and the transport system appeared rather disorganised. Yet everything, Wilson said, would work out for the best.

The conference delegates re-embarked at Murmansk on a British cruiser and reached London on 3 March. From there, after several days, Scialoja and the other Italians departed again by train, arriving in Turin on the afternoon of the 8th. Like their British and French colleagues, they had scarcely taken a foot from the train step before hurrying to issue categorical statements about the "most encouraging" things seen in Russia and the extremely high morale of the army, which awaited the great spring battles with "confidence".

Although the correspondents of the various Western newspapers in Petrograd were much less optimistic than these "eyewitnesses", no one expected them to be contradicted so quickly, within a matter of days, and so dramatically. The Tsar abdicated on 15 March. The news reached Italy via London the following day, when Bonar Law announced it in the House of Commons amid general astonishment.

An Italian commercial delegation was in Russia at the time. It had been sent in January to study the possible expansion of Italian-Russian trade after the war and was chaired by Marquis Della Torretta,

with Commendatore Zaccaria Oberti, president of the Genoa Chamber of Commerce, serving as deputy head of mission. On 30 January the delegation was received by the Tsar at Tsarskoye Selo. After the audience, Oberti remained with the dignitaries, praising the impression of goodness the Tsar had made upon him. He received the reply:

- You are fortunate to have a King who possesses will and character and has understood his duty towards the nation. We have the misfortune of having a Tsar who has neither will nor character and will be the ruin of his family and his country.

The mission, somewhat bewildered by the atmosphere it perceived, was invited on 5 February to a dinner offered in its honour by the Russian Government, at which there were numerous toasts to the Tsar and the King. The following day, however, a false rumour circulated that the principal host, Interior Minister Protopopov, had resigned. The mission had the disagreeable sensation of trotting across a minefield.

After leaving the capital, the small party had an opportunity to recover its spirits in the southern provinces. It visited Rostov-on-Don and then Odessa, where it took an interest in Ukrainian durum wheat and where the city authorities recalled the ancient commerce maintained by the Genoese with the Black Sea ports. On 5 March the delegation returned to Petrograd, enjoyed the greatest convenience in witnessing the garrison revolt and the overthrow of the old regime, and departed as soon as possible, returning to Italy at the end of April.

At first the governments and peoples of the Entente did not fully understand what lay beneath the Russian revolt, which, as so often in similar cases, had begun with the mutiny of several units. The first person to pay the price of the upheaval was poor Nicholas II, whose goodness had been extolled until only a few days earlier to conceal the sense of guilt caused by the presence of Russia's autocratic Government within the community of the "free democracies". Jokes circulating in Russia against the old regime were repeated with satisfaction in Italy too: "One tear from the Tsar will no longer cost the country a thousand handkerchiefs", and "The Tsar's crown does not prevent headaches".

The first political interpretation of the Russian Revolution among Italian interventionist circles was that it constituted an unpleasant surprise for the Central Powers and for Italy's official Socialists, since the new Russia would represent a mortal danger both to Germany and to the advocates of neutrality at any cost.

Meanwhile bewildering events followed one another in rapid succession. The Russian imperial family was arrested; command of the army was entrusted to Grand Duke Nicholas and immediately taken from him again, ultimately passing to General Alekseev; embryonic governments were announced and denied within a few hours. None of this was easy to explain in terms of the Russian crowds' enthusiasm for war. But when the first glimmer of a Provisional Government found an opportunity to proclaim above the confused noise of meetings that its principal concern would be to improve the army's efficiency and continue the war until victory, the propaganda of the Western Powers seized upon the slogan and repeated it to exhaustion, as though the spectre of possible defection could be kept away by continual, hammering expressions of confidence.

Amid the flood of voices and rumours, what later became known as the famous "Order No. 1" of the Soldiers' Soviet, dated 14 March, passed unnoticed. It created company and battalion committees and transferred control of weapons from the officers to them. No greater publicity was given to the "Declaration of the Rights of Soldiers", adopted on 22 March and published in Izvestia on the 28th. It deprived officers of the right to impose disciplinary sanctions, abolished compulsory saluting and legalised the election of soldiers' "internal committees". In view of the immediate success achieved by

this new and singular disciplinary regulation, it would have been easy to predict that the collapse of the Russian army was now only a matter of months.

Several weeks after the revolution, when politicians had had time to regain their bearings, a surprising unanimity of approval appeared: everyone, friends and enemies alike, liked the new Russian regime. The Western governments were satisfied - the French Parliament acclaimed the revolutionary Government, and the Milan City Council, at Turati's suggestion, sent greetings and applause to the new Russia - and even the Vatican was said to be pleased. It was more difficult to explain the satisfaction of Germany and Austria-Hungary.

While General Cadorna, speaking with the editor of the Tribuna on 29 March, expressed the view that the emergence of a democratic Russia behind Germany could not fail to concern the latter for conservative and dynastic reasons, the German Chancellor was at that very moment indirectly contradicting our Generalissimo by declaring to the Reichstag that the Tsar was the victim of his tragic guilt:

> Malicious people say that the Imperial Government wishes to restore the Tsar's rule over his enslaved subjects. These are calumnies which I reject with the greatest energy. We desire nothing more than soon to live at peace with the Russian people, a peace established upon an honourable basis for both sides.

Hindsight permits the conclusion that, in theory and from a strictly logical standpoint, Cadorna was right and Bethmann-Hollweg wrong. Yet Germany in 1917, gripped by the throat by its enemies and facing the prospect of American intervention within a very short time, was driven to take measures that would prove suicidal in the long run. On the one hand it allowed Lenin, Krupskaya and several of their followers to travel in the famous sealed railway carriage from Zurich to Petrograd through Sweden. On the other, in order to test the resistance of Russian troops after the revolution, it organised a modest attack against one sector of the Russian front.

The offensive was launched by a reinforced army corps against an enemy bridgehead west of the River Stochod, a little west of Kovel, where a strong body of troops had been isolated by the spring rains. Within a few days the operation ended in the complete defeat of the Russian forces, which lost 25,000 men. It was a symptom that Russian resistance was rapidly deteriorating and that the best strategy was to allow the process of decomposition to proceed undisturbed. An external attack, by contrast, might have strengthened the wavering Cadet party in Russia, which favoured continuing the war. This was all the more true because the Central Powers, heavily engaged or about to be engaged on the Western and Italian fronts, in Macedonia, Mesopotamia and Palestine, had no large reserves available. Their only reserves consisted of the army on the Eastern Front, which it was prudent to preserve until it could be employed elsewhere.

The Russian Revolution continued to be poorly understood in the West even as disturbing indications began to multiply. By remaining silent about them, it was possible amid the spreading chaos to paint the situation in the most favourable colours. The revolt of the overgrown Petrograd garrison that had begun the revolution had indeed been accompanied by "excesses" committed by demagogues, but these had proved "fruitless" and tranquillity returned within a few days, on 20 March. Tatars and Kirghiz had "enthusiastically" joined the revolution; delegates of the Provisional Government returning to Riga from the front brought excellent news about the spirit of the troops, on 27 March. War Minister Guchkov had received an enthusiastic welcome from the combatants; General Brusilov had actually been carried in triumph, on 28 March. "There will be no peace without victory," declared Milyukov, Foreign Minister in the Provisional Government, on 5 April.

Very little was known about Lenin. He had attended the socialist congresses at Zimmerwald and Kienthal in 1915 and 1916 respectively, representing the extreme tendency, and was regarded either as an irresponsible revolutionary fanatic or, by those who thought themselves better informed, including Gaetano Salvemini, simply as an agent in the Kaiser's pay. When he arrived in Russia, correspondents of the Western press, with the exception of socialist newspapers, immediately described him as the "evil genius" and traitor of the revolution, the man who wanted to make peace with the Central Powers at any price and who had invaded with noisy friends the apartment of the ballerina Kěesinskaja, formerly a favourite of the Tsar, earning a lawsuit for the noisy unlawful occupation of private premises.

Kerensky, the new tribune, contributed considerably to confusing ideas about Russia and what was happening there. In trying to deceive others, he deceived himself.

> I consider useful, he had said on 14 April, the criticisms and controls of the Council of Workers and Soldiers, but they must be exercised benevolently.

A month later, after becoming Minister of War, Kerensky received representatives of the press and declared himself confident in the army's efficiency. The Russian army was not "a gathering of idlers" but a "formidable, threatening and living force". "We fear," he exclaimed with little foresight, "no demagogy either from the Right or from the Left." As for fraternisation between Russian and enemy soldiers, about which there was so much talk, it fortunately possessed no general character, he declared again on 2 June.

In those same days Austrian prisoners captured by our troops on the Isonzo stated that fraternisation was very frequent on the Russian front. If a German or Austrian soldier happened to be killed by some ill-intentioned men who wanted to continue fighting, delegations departed from the Russian lines to apologise and announce that the guilty men had been "punished". The reverse, however, did not occur. Nevertheless, on 4 June Kerensky ventured once more to proclaim:

> Despite the destruction of the old discipline, the power of the Russian army increases day by day, founded upon a new and more conscious discipline. I can state once and for all that fraternisation has ceased.

The Allied military missions busied themselves conducting propaganda among the Russian soldiers. Major Oscar Tonelli, a member of the Italian mission headed by General Romei, also spoke in Russian at Okhta, in the barrack square, before four thousand soldiers. The subject he discussed - discipline as understood in the Italian army - aroused such interest and enthusiasm among his listeners that Tonelli was finally carried in triumph to cries of "Long live Italy!", on 29 March. The episode was considered significant enough to deserve a plate by Achille Beltrame in the Domenica del Corriere.

On 9 April three thousand Cossacks of the Petrograd garrison marched with flags and music to the Italian embassy. Repeatedly summoned, Marquis Carlotti, relieved that they did not intend to lynch him, appeared on the balcony and improvised a brief speech "celebrating the alliance of free peoples fighting Prussian militarism". He was greeted at the end by thunderous hurrahs. Meanwhile Major Tonelli, having reached Petrograd after his wanderings along the front, continued to make pilgrimages among the Russian barracks, arousing enthusiasm everywhere and especially in the Simeonovsky Regiment.

Such verbal euphoria corresponded, however, to complete apathy in practical matters. While great battles flared on the other fronts, absolute quiet reigned on the Eastern Front after the tragedy on the Stochod, which passed almost unnoticed, broken only by an occasional cannon shot. The Allies therefore began to show signs of nervousness. It was now evident that the Austro-Germans were carefully avoiding any military action for fear of damaging an anarchy that could only favour them. "Long live the Russian Revolution, certainly - but not too much!"

The alarm was now being raised by Russian figures less deluded than Kerensky. "The Fatherland is on the edge of the abyss," War Minister Guchkov declared to the Duma on 11 May. His resignation, Alekseev's and those of other ministers followed a few days later. "A dictator - that is Russia's supreme need at this moment," wrote the Daily Express, quoted by the Italian press:

> A modern Cromwell, capable of dominating the course of events with an iron hand and saving the country from the terrible threat of anarchy.

Since it appeared useful to accompany encouragement with a threat, albeit expressed in negative form:

> The British Embassy in Russia denies that the Allies ever considered asking Japan to exert pressure upon Russia.

This occurred on 17 May. The following day the new coalition Government headed by Kerensky was installed. For a time Western anxieties subsided. Kerensky promised the offensive that his predecessors had not dared launch for fear of the worst. There was nothing to do but believe him and wait.

During the last ten days of February, British patrols that daily prodded the German trenches along the Western Front observed a reduced reaction from the enemy. Stronger detachments sent forward to investigate reported that the Germans offered little resistance and in certain places were withdrawing. Aerial observation also confirmed suspicious movements of pack trains and motor vehicles. Pressure was then applied along the entire front, timidly at first and afterwards more boldly. It was observed that from Arras to La Fère the German army was falling back, offering weak resistance to weak attacks and extremely strong resistance to violent attacks. The Germans were retreating, but at a speed fixed by themselves, and would not alter it under enemy pressure.

During March the French observed the same signs of abandonment between La Fère and Soissons and imprudently hurled themselves headlong forward. They encountered fierce resistance and suffered bloody losses in the attempt to accelerate the German withdrawal.

At the end of March the backward movement stopped. The Germans had abandoned the whole enormous circular salient projecting towards Amiens and withdrawn along the chord. The Allied advance - or rather the German retreat - had reached a varying depth of as much as sixty kilometres along a front of one hundred kilometres. In no offensive, not even the four-month Battle of the Somme, had the Allies ever captured more than one twentieth of that area. It was the greatest reoccupation of ground on the Western Front since the Battle of the Marne.

It was not easy, however, to answer the question: why had the Germans retreated? According to the British Command, it was due to the continuous pressure exerted by the British army, which was little more than a tautology. It was then said that the withdrawal had been caused by the "unceasing pressure" of the artillery. In short, the Germans had given way in order to take shelter. It was deduced that their fighting spirit had deteriorated, as proved by the fact - emphasised by the Reuters correspondent - that Germans now surrendered "by the dozen", whereas the year before they had surrendered one at a time.

General Nivelle, the new Commander-in-Chief of the French army, could scarcely believe his ears and was beside himself with joy. How could the Germans have abandoned so valuable a pledge? Had they become idiots?

> If he, Nivelle, had been able to dictate orders to Hindenburg, he could not have chosen any more favourable to the French army.

Yet the German retreat certainly did not make preparation of the forthcoming French offensive easier. It had long been planned in accordance with the decisions taken at Chantilly. Should the plans be left unchanged as though nothing had happened, or should they be partly modified, perhaps even set aside?

In the abandoned area, once rich and fertile, the Germans had made a desert in the most inhuman meaning of the word. Everything had been methodically destroyed: houses blown up with dynamite, trees sawn down one by one, every industrial installation smashed, and the population capable of work, male and female, deported. Only the old, the sick and children were left behind with a few rations, and they received the liberating troops weeping with misery and despair.

As a result of the advance imposed upon them along almost two hundred kilometres, the British and French were compelled to abandon their old fortified positions and remain more or less in the open while new trenches were built and the artillery moved forward. This movement would require many weeks. Where they had not withdrawn, the Germans had strengthened their deployment alarmingly with the divisions saved by shortening the front.

The Franco-British offensive had originally been intended to involve the whole front between Arras and Reims. Unless a considerable delay were accepted, however, it would be impossible to reorganise the attack along the new line imposed by the German withdrawal. Reduced in width, the offensive became a terrifyingly frontal attack against the most formidable positions and those best prepared for defence. According to some, this was the most probable explanation of the German retreat. Others feared for the Russian front, while the Italian Command suspected that the Germans intended to use the troops saved to form a manoeuvre mass for employment on our front.

The beginning of the next offensive therefore had to be delayed in order to adapt to the new situation. Nivelle, however, under the spell of the good fortune that had so far blessed him, refused to hear of it. Neither the date nor the forces were to be changed. His Chief of Staff, Colonel d'Alenson, supported him in this opinion. Extremely tall and spectral, with haunted eyes and consumption in its final stage, d'Alenson had only a few months to live and knew it. Yet within that interval he believed he could do much to destroy Germany for the greater glory of France. It was fated and inevitable that this would cost the lives of very many Frenchmen, but such was the price of glory.

Not everyone shared the Commander-in-Chief's convictions. The commanders of the French army groups had come to take a decidedly unfavourable view, and a certain hesitation could be perceived even in the British Command, usually so carefree when an attack was in question. The closer one came to the battle line, the more confidence in the operation's success diminished.

The decisive council of war was held at Compiègne on 6 April. The new Minister of War, the mathematician Painlevé, who had succeeded Lyautey in Ribot's Cabinet, tried to persuade Nivelle to postpone the operation. Pétain explained his lack of confidence. France now possessed extremely few human reserves. The Generalissimo himself had admitted that this was the final effort France could afford. Why not wait for the Americans, now about to enter the war, and leave the British and Italians the task of holding the enemy during this dangerous interregnum?

Nivelle remained immovable. If he were not permitted to carry out the agreed programme, he was ready to resign. This appears to have been the decisive argument against cancelling the great offensive. The British would attack north of Arras, as they did on 9 April. While they and the westernmost French armies held the Germans before the area from which they had recently withdrawn to the "Hindenburg Line", three French armies would assault on both sides of Reims: on the Craonne plateau, along which ran the prettily named promenade called the Chemin des Dames in memory of the processions made there by the ladies of the Kings of France, and in the Moronvilliers region.

The Fifth and Sixth Armies were to be employed immediately, while the Tenth would remain in reserve to exploit the breach expected to be opened in the German lines within twenty-four or, at most, forty-

eight hours. The secret of victory: a brutal attack of unprecedented violence. Artillery preparation with a creeping barrage. Training of the troops. Surprise.

The victor of Douaumont's prescription was general and not particularly original. Unfortunately the last, but not least important, of these factors - surprise - disappeared. In order to make even the humblest soldiers better participants in the forthcoming operations, Nivelle had ordered detailed written instructions to be distributed even to the companies in the line. The praiseworthy intention was incompatible with caution. In a raid carried out south of Ripont on 3 March, the German 51st Division secured a choice prize: nothing less than the New Instructions Concerning the Purpose and Methods of a General Offensive issued by the French Command. Alerted, the Germans doubled their vigilance and began moving further reinforcements towards the threatened sector.

The British attack nevertheless achieved some success. "The results were greatly superior to our expectations," General Wilson wrote. Since the advance had reached a depth of five kilometres on a fifteen-kilometre front, expectations were evidently modest.

At last, amid a snowstorm still bestowed by the atrocious winter at so advanced a season, half a million French soldiers moved to the attack at dawn on 16 April. "The battle began at six and by seven it was already lost," Deputy and Lieutenant Ybarnégaray later declared in the Chamber.

The formations launched into the assault quickly discovered that the artillery preparation had not appreciably weakened the German defence. Thousands of German machine guns opened fire simultaneously. When the brave attackers had carried the first heights by their impetus, German automatic weapons placed in caves with two exits continued to mow them down from behind.

Many units, unable to advance, watched the curtain of fire produced by the French artillery disappear into the distance. Following the creeping-barrage system, it lengthened its range at the predetermined rate of thirty metres per minute. Some battalions later managed to advance despite the hail of German artillery. Meanwhile the French batteries, having vaguely learned that they had moved too fast, brought the creeping barrage back, striking many French formations painfully attempting to make their way through the tangle of the first German trenches.

The fate of II Colonial Corps was particularly pitiful. This first advance guard of the "Black Army", stationed in southern France during the winter, had also been granted the honour of taking part in the offensive. The officers commanding the coloured soldiers had advised against employing them in so severe a climate, but they were not heard. On the morning of 16 April, a substantial proportion of the Senegalese had already been put out of action by pneumonia and pleurisy. Those remaining in the trench chattered with cold and could not grip their weapons because their hands were so cramped. They went into the attack carrying their rifles under their arms like umbrellas and "fell by ranks, as palisades fall".

Great as the slaughter of the colonial troops was - of ten thousand riflemen, 6,500 were killed on the first day - that of the French was far greater. From dawn on Monday 16 April, losses accumulated at such a rate that by Tuesday evening 30,000 dead and 80,000 wounded had already been counted, while German losses did not exceed 60,000 men, of whom 21,000 had been taken prisoner.

The advance had reached three kilometres at certain points. In other sectors German counter-attacks restored the original situation within a few hours. Hospital disorganisation greatly aggravated the losses. The French Command had begun from the assumption of a major breakthrough and therefore hoped to use the German hospitals. Confusion reached heights difficult to surpass: trains filled with wounded and mutilated men wandered around France for days before finding somewhere to discharge their suffering cargo.

What had happened had occurred several times under Joffre's direction. Unlike his predecessor, however, who confined himself to saying that he was "gnawing" the enemy, Nivelle had imprudently promised too much. The results, no worse than those achieved in earlier, loudly trumpeted offensives, could not even be compared with the hopes and illusions of the eve.

The setback nevertheless failed to disturb Nivelle. The Napoleonic breakthrough guaranteed "within twenty-four or, at most, forty-eight hours" had failed? Then the war of attrition would be resumed. As though nothing had happened, he therefore prepared to renew the old-style attacks, returning to the concept of "wearing down" the Germans by bleeding the French.

This time, however, Nivelle met opposition from everyone: the Government, the most highly regarded generals and, above all, the army.

Extremely serious mutinies broke out in sixteen army corps. Several infantry regiments refused to return to the trenches, particularly those numbered 17, 18, 36, 109, 128, 129, 307, 310 and 370. Seditious cries began to be shouted by the rebellious detachments:

- Long live peace! Death to those responsible!
- Long live the revolution!
- Down with the war! Long live the Russian Revolution!
- Let us tear off our war crosses, these bicycle badges, the honour of badly paid slaves.

More specific cries accused the High Command:

- The Boches knew the time of the attack a month in advance, and that is a disgrace!

Other units, singing the Internationale, threatened to march on Paris. They intended to send a delegation to the Chamber and force it to demand immediate peace. One division of XXI Army Corps, while not refusing to relieve other units, opposed being used in offensive operations. If attacked, it would defend itself, and that was all.

General Headquarters made one final attempt to change the terms of the matter: the soldiers were mutinying because the offensive desired by Nivelle had been suspended.

Nivelle grasped at other supports and protested violently even against Cadorna, who would not decide to attack by the agreed date - 8 May, no more than three weeks after the beginning of the French offensive [6].

On 15 May the Generalissimo was dismissed and returned to the obscurity from which he had emerged for a few months. Philippe Pétain took his place. People spoke of the "Pétain miracle". Pétain merely employed a quality apparently lost amid the general frenzy: common sense.

France had no more men. From August 1914 to July 1917 it had suffered 1,100,000 dead and 2,500,000 wounded. Fifty per cent of the active male population had become a war casualty. There was therefore nothing to do but adopt a policy of recuperation. More than ever it was necessary to wait for the Americans and leave to the British and Italians, who had not yet exhausted their cannon fodder, the task of holding the Germans and their allies.

Executions were limited to the indispensable minimum: about sixty of the most strongly implicated were put against the wall. It would not do to exaggerate, because cruel repression might produce the opposite effect. The soldiers had concluded that in rebelling they risked at most decimation, whereas by going into the attack they risked much more.

Pétain prevented despair from becoming the troops' bad adviser. He toured the units, listened to complaints, promised to avoid useless slaughter and kept his promise.

The French army rested in order to rebuild its strength - a very relative "rest", such as could be conceived in 1917-18 on the Western Front. From August to February of the following year, "only" 240,000 men were put out of action. This represented a rate of losses one third of that previously sustained.

This was the only means that allowed France to withstand Germany's terrible convulsions the following year, before the fatal turning point of July 1918.

It is nevertheless remarkable that the Germans failed to learn what was happening in the French army. They received only uncertain and confused indications, which they suspected were false or had been circulated by the French Intelligence Service itself. Had they suspected the truth, they might have attempted to exploit the favourable moment, although continuous British preparations in Flanders kept them occupied and anxious.

For while the exhausted French army settled onto the defensive, the British army had every intention of attacking headlong and conducting "its own" war.

Until the beginning of 1917, the solidarity in arms between Italy and her allies had found practical expression only through a few weak links. French and British officers were attached to the commands of the large Italian formations; the British Red Cross maintained several sections with our army, one of them led by the historian Trevelyan, who had received the appointment after serving as a conscientious objector; some senior dignitary arrived and departed; and from time to time missions came down to decorate brave men whose fame had crossed the Alps.

A particularly numerous deputation, headed by a colonel delighted to escape momentarily from other, less agreeable duties, arrived from France in early January 1917 to pin the Croix de Guerre on Captain D'Annunzio's breast:

> [the] great Italian who preached the holy war from the heights of the Capitol and, through his genius and enthusiasm, inspired the heroic raising of the Latin shields against the enemy of our civilisation and our race.

In 1917 the coming and going of illustrious figures on our front intensified. One of the first visitors was Generalissimo Nivelle, who arrived in Udine on 4 February, accompanied by the inseparable d'Alenson, to meet Cadorna. Official propaganda used the word "seduction". In Italy General Nivelle had seduced everyone: all hung upon his lips, all asked him to explain his tactical and strategic theories, all wished to know his plans and his special methods of attack, so successfully tested at Verdun and destined within a few weeks for another and much more severe trial.

Once the star of his fragile good fortune had set, however, it was said, with little generosity, that Nivelle had not left a particularly happy memory. Even a "most exalted personage" [7] was said to have been scandalised by the lightness with which the Frenchman dispensed unsolicited advice, sprinkling it with the names of Italian mountains and rivers whose locations he confused considerably. He believed that Korada lay in the Carnic Alps, that the Isonzo and Natisone flowed together, and spoke of the inaccessible mountains of the Upper Isonzo as "hills".

In this respect Nivelle proved no more ignorant than others. Minister Bissolati, who travelled to London in the second half of January to plead for a concentration of the common effort against Austria, discovered at a meeting of the British War Committee that someone "did not know exactly where the Trentino was". Cadorna himself, moreover, had been compelled to dismiss a general after discovering that he did not know the geography of the sector in which his subordinate troops were deployed.

Cadorna, who conferred with Nivelle, found him frivolous and superficial. One may nevertheless suspect that Cadorna was encouraged to form this severe judgement by the fact that the other man could not tolerate the idea of sending troops to Italy. With his mind fixed upon his own offensive, he was hardly prepared to overturn his plans. If Italy were subjected to the weight of a combined Austro-German attack, Nivelle believed that he could improvise a relief offensive on the French front.

With rumours already beginning to circulate of a forthcoming offensive against Italy, this did not suffice to reassure Cadorna. By his estimate, the enemy could add another forty divisions to the thirty-eight already deployed against us. Twelve might be scraped together from the Eastern Front, fifteen saved from the Western Front, and about fifteen more were new German divisions then undergoing training. To achieve this concentration, the enemy would have had to assume the defensive on every other front. The hypothesis was therefore extreme and highly improbable; yet the mere thought that it might begin to be implemented was enough to make one's flesh creep. If this combination of circumstances came about, Cadorna considered the assistance of twenty divisions indispensable. Nivelle thought he had misheard. Twenty divisions? Cadorna must be joking: no more than five or six could possibly be detached from the Western Front.

Colonel Gatti, a member of Cadorna's entourage, did not form so negative an impression of Nivelle as his chief did. He found him courteous, amiable and persuasive; he possessed the ability to convince rather than command. These were the same virtues that had so delighted Lloyd George, and Gatti, a talented novelist and journalist, was better able to appreciate them than the Chief of the General Staff. Yet Colonel Gatti too detected a certain fragility in Nivelle's proposals: the element of "luck" played far too important a part in them.

When Nivelle departed on 10 February, after also meeting the King and being photographed with him in the snow in an attitude of smiling satisfaction, the only important agreement reached by the two generalissimos was that an emergency plan should be studied for the immediate transport of Allied troops to Italy upon a simple warning from Cadorna. They were to pour in at the rate of forty-eight trains a day. It was not much, but the plan proved useful and workable at the time of the rout at Caporetto.

Meanwhile, Bissolati's visit to London, during which he had done his best to impress upon the British the catastrophic consequences of a rupture of the Italian front, resulted in the despatch to Italy of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Robertson.

Robertson's geography, like Nivelle's, left something to be desired. The learning he displayed was prompted by the British military attache at our Supreme Command, General Ratcliffe. In Robertson too, faithful to the attitude he had adopted at the Rome Conference, Cadorna found no inclination to reinforce the Italian front for offensive purposes. In agreement with the Westerners and opposed to his Prime Minister's opinion, Robertson could not be shaken from his conviction that the enemy should be attacked where he was strongest. As for assisting Italy in an emergency, he shared General Wilson's opinion, expressed at the beginning of April:

> We must save Italy if she is attacked by the Boches, but we must send her as few troops as possible.

A new pilgrim, General Foch, was sent to Italy a few days after Robertson's departure to study the organisation of the possible transport of Allied troops in case of need. Foch, hopeful and soldierly, arrived among us, Alberto Lumbroso relates, with:

> a cataract of attack, manoeuvre, offensive, and so forth. These nouns were interspersed with a deluge of bon! bon! bon!, a monosyllable truly worthy of an optimist. The Duke of Aosta told me that this

> hailstorm of an interjection had struck him so forcefully that it gave him the impression that the bons became the principal part of the speech and everything else receded into the background.

At about the same time our front was also visited by Rudyard Kipling. The famous novelist could not resist the temptation to contribute to the spreading idiocy by coining a maxim of which he would not later boast: "it was clear that there were two races, the human race and the German race".

In April, to Lloyd George's partial satisfaction, two British regiments of medium artillery under General Hamilton were sent to Italy. Their sixty-four guns were placed chiefly in the vicinity of Seltz, north of Monfalcone. The French also sent us thirty-five heavy pieces. The ten thousand gunners serving these weapons were the first and, until Caporetto, the only important contribution of Allied troops to our front.

At first there were a few misunderstandings between our soldiers and the British. When the British, seeing our units march past, thought to please them by shouting in Italian, "Long live the war!", they did not understand the silent response. It consisted of placing the left hand upon the right forearm and moving it slowly like a pendulum with the fist closed. Third Army headquarters hastened to distribute a circular reprimanding officers who had neglected:

> to cultivate [in our soldiers] that formal discipline which is the true foundation... of discipline.

Everything was quickly smoothed over once the British understood that it was better to cheer things more cheerful than war.

After the Rome Conference, once the prospect that the Italian front would become the principal theatre of operations in 1917 had faded, the psychological situation had reversed. The suspicion began to spread that the Austro-Germans would be the ones to attack on the Italian front. It was whispered that a grand offensive was being prepared, a new "punitive expedition" on a much larger scale than the one attempted in 1916. The enemy was credited with the intention of attacking simultaneously from the Trentino and the Isonzo, crushing the Italian army between the jaws of an immense pair of pincers.

The press was already preparing public opinion for the worst. The leading article in the Corriere della Sera of 21 March declared:

> The second Strafexpedition. A second desperate attack is about to be renewed against our lines; everyone foresees it, and the enemy himself brazenly announces it in order to intimidate us, declaring that German troops too will descend from the Brenner to assault us. Like Serbia and Romania, Italy too will be crushed beneath the German heel... Will the enemy carry out Conrad von Hotzendorf's favourite plan against Brescia? The undertaking will be doomed to failure if the hearts of the citizens behind the lines remain unshaken.

A few days later Cadorna himself declared in an interview with the Giornale d'Italia:

> Whether they come or do not come, I act as though they were coming and in great numbers... I am certain that I have with me a magnificent army of energy and faith... The undertaking attributed to our enemies, if carried out, would assume the proportions of Verdun...

The waters were muddied still further by the voluntary German withdrawal on the Franco-British front in March. Wilson writes:

> Cadorna believes that it means a forthcoming attack on the Italian front. Alekseev probably imagines that it means an attack against the Russians!...
>
> If I examine the three objectives of the Boches - Calais, Paris and Venice - I am tempted to rule Paris out. If we then seize Vimy and La Bassee, I would rule Calais out. As for Venice, we still have five or six weeks in which to work out plans. There remain the Boche designs upon Odessa, Kiev, Moscow and Petrograd. One may ask whether, in the present state of the Russian Revolution, a

> major attack upon any one of these cities would not induce the Russians to make peace. Today I find it difficult to answer.

These rumours, mixed with others still more fantastic, made the prospect extremely obscure. It was said that Germany had secretly sent, or was sending, an army of 150,000 or 200,000 men to Mexico to invade the United States. In those same days the British Admiralty, for which the submarine war was a first-class headache, discovered that the Germans had concentrated about thirty destroyers along the Belgian coast and that a landing at Dunkirk might be feared. Douglas Haig, who possessed all the phlegm attributed to his race, remained indifferent to the report. It did not concern him, since the defence of the French coast was the responsibility of the French; his task was to seize Vimy Ridge.

As for Nivelle, Wilson wrote in his diary: "What does he say? I shall ask him tomorrow. Let us hope he thinks, as I do, that everyone at the Admiralty and the War Office ought to be locked up as lunatics.

Meanwhile, the press campaign conducted in France to prepare public opinion for timely Allied assistance in the event of a great Austro-German offensive against Italy bore meagre fruit. Colonel Brancaccio, a member of the Italian Military Mission at French General Headquarters, reported this persistent scepticism:

> In general, neither military nor political circles believe in a German offensive against us. They tend to think that we Italians are putting these rumours into circulation, and they listen to us with distrust.
>
> For various and complex reasons, a doubt about our sincerity always persists in French minds. It is always thought that we act with ulterior motives and limited frankness, so that whenever we advance a thesis, the spontaneous question is what lies behind it... What becomes publicly visible of our action appears so uncertain and doubtful as to make even us Italians hesitant; very often we do not know how to answer unfriendly French observations.

It would nevertheless have been a grave injustice to General Cadorna to attribute to him an intention to remain inactive. If anyone was prepared to come to blows - or rather to make others come to blows - it was our Chief of the General Staff. But, burned by the dangerous experience of the previous year, he was now dominated by excessive caution. Until the situation on the other fronts became clear, he was firmly determined not to commit our forces to an offensive.

How real was the danger of a combined Austro-German attack? It existed, but only in Marshal Conrad's head. He planned to assemble forty-two divisions in addition to the thirty already deployed and attack us from the Asiago plateau and the Upper Isonzo. He had already had studies, tables and graphs completed; but to put such an ambitious programme into practice he needed German assistance. The German High Command, however, was as Western-minded as its adversaries. The Italian theatre was entirely secondary; the war could be won only in the West. If Robertson, Haig and Nivelle were short-sighted, Hindenburg and Ludendorff in this instance proved completely blind.

The error of the Entente generals was therefore compensated by an equally mistaken assessment on the part of their opponents. It is not impossible to argue that the former were ultimately right to refuse to send many troops travelling from one front to another, thereby making them unusable for a considerable time.

In any case Conrad, the prophet of the group, was becoming tiresome and insistent. At the beginning of March he was therefore relieved as Chief of the General Staff of the Austro-Hungarian army and replaced by Arz. As a consolation prize, the old marshal was given command of the Trentino army on the Italian front. The measure was intended to keep the Italian Supreme Command in a state of agitation as far as possible. Yet the military preparations that had begun to be implemented were interrupted.

Our command was not deceived for long. An offensive such as the one attributed to the enemy required immense preparations. The First Italian Army's intelligence office for operational troops, however, guaranteed that no important movement was taking place in the enemy rear. When the British attack from Arras began and Nivelle's unhappy offensive was launched, the Supreme Command gained the clear impression that no grave danger now threatened our front: all German reserves were engaged or about to be engaged elsewhere.

During April the situation became clearer still. In a letter dated 11 April, Cadorna had already informed the Duke of Aosta and Capello that the enemy preparations had suffered a setback. Between the end of the month and the beginning of May, the threat of a German invasion of Switzerland - advanced as a further possibility and making the task of the Situation Office worthy of a fortune-teller - also faded. Units concentrated as a precaution in the Varese area could therefore be recalled towards the Julian front.

On 19 April the Supreme Command issued the formal order to prepare the new offensive, designated by the symbol Operation V and destined to pass into history, chiefly through Austrian historiography, as the Tenth Battle of the Isonzo. The Prime Minister was informed on 24 April that operations would soon begin, and preparations were set in motion during the following days.

They were days of torment for the Supreme Command, continually bombarded with the question: when will Italy attack? Bissolati asked in order to silence the questions insistently addressed to him from London and Paris. Nivelle imperiously demanded that Cadorna observe to the letter the agreements reached at Chantilly, under which the Italian offensive was to begin within three weeks of the French one and therefore no later than 7 May. There were also the impatient people at home who, discoursing upon strategy, thought no moment had ever been so favourable to Italy. The only people demanding nothing were the Russians, whose conscience was, so to speak, unclean, and the soldiers, who were already bleeding at the rate of three thousand men a week and had no wish to multiply that average tenfold or a hundredfold.

The plan of action was extremely simple and based upon exploiting our great numerical superiority. Italy could deploy about thirty divisions on the attack front against the equivalent of sixteen Austrian divisions. Allowing for the different strengths of battalions and brigades, we enjoyed a numerical superiority of five to three.

An initial artillery demonstration was planned along the entire front from Tolmino to the sea. The Gorizia Zone would then mount a subsidiary attack from Bodrez to San Marco. Subsequently, the Third Army would carry out the principal breakthrough operation between Castagnevizza and the sea. During this sequence of events, the right wing of the Gorizia Zone and the left wing of the Third Army were to support one another.

A complicated transfer of artillery was also planned. On day beta, the opening of the offensive in the Gorizia Zone, one hundred guns temporarily lent by the Third Army to General Capello were to strengthen the Gorizia Zone's preparatory fire. Before the beginning of day gamma, the opening of the Third Army offensive, a mobile group of batteries numbering about two hundred pieces was to be transferred from the Gorizia Zone to the Third Army. General Cadorna further prescribed:

> Since it is my intention, subject to such variations as may be advised by the situation, that the Third Army launch its offensive and open the preparatory fire no later than day beta plus four - I therefore prescribe as the final limit gamma equals beta plus four - it is necessary that the transfer to the Third Army of the artillery of the known mobile group take place within time limits permitting the best employment on day gamma of these guns, which form an integral part of the Karst deployment.

Detailed instructions followed for the timely movement of these batteries.

General Capello disliked the order. "This was no longer manoeuvre; it was algebra!" he observed. Capello had been assigned to the Gorizia Zone on 11 March and had immediately begun, "like an engine always running", in the words of one of his subordinate officers, to place the army under pressure. Eager to make up for his enforced inactivity, he did not conceal the hope that the attack in the Gorizia region might immediately produce results so promising that the operation intended as a supporting action could become the principal one. The rigid artillery movement prescribed in advance restricted his freedom of action and conflicted somewhat with his hopes.

Capello's chances of achieving this purpose were hindered less by the Supreme Command than by the poor service of his intelligence branch. On 6 May, on the basis of information he had received, he concluded that ninety Austrian battalions were deployed against his army and that his numerical superiority was therefore reduced to twenty-five per cent. This estimate is judged "false or grossly exaggerated" by the lawyer Baj-Macario, then an artillery officer with II Army Corps. Boroevic, the Austrian commander on the Isonzo, was well informed by his agents that the main Italian effort would be directed towards Trieste and had moved no reserves to the Middle Isonzo.

Only sixty battalions therefore faced Capello, forming XVI and XVII Army Corps of the Austro-Hungarian Fifth Army. As a consequence of this mistaken estimate of the enemy forces, Capello restricted the attack to the section from Plava to San Marco, although he had originally planned to extend it as far as Doblar. The envelopment of the Austrian positions on the Bainsizza plateau was removed from the realm of possibility; only a feint at Bodrez with a few battalions was organised. The assault as a whole thus assumed the typical character of a purely frontal attack. Instead of a shortage, there was an excess of infantry forces which, unable to manoeuvre, obstructed and harmed one another.

The offensive, fixed for 8 May - exactly three weeks after the beginning of the French offensive - was postponed until the 12th solely for meteorological reasons. Immediately before the battle, General Cadorna therefore had time to issue a warning circular to the Army and Army Corps Commands:

> 11 May 1917
>
> His Excellency General Pecori Giraldi, commander of the First Army, has in recent days completed his report on the inquiry into the military events of May 1916 in the Trentino and on the Plateaux...
>
> I reserve further communications on the subject, but I do not wish to delay in pointing out one of the most important conclusions drawn from the inquiry: that the enemy offensive's great initial success arose particularly from the inadequacy displayed by several officers who held command in that region - professional inadequacy, but above all deficiency of character.
>
> It emerges with complete clarity from the report that, had generals truly worthy and deserving of the commands entrusted to them been at the head of the large formations engaged at the opening of the offensive, they would have known how to meet events adequately. Those events would not immediately have assumed the grave course that came close to placing the final outcome of our war in the most serious danger.

The Generalissimo called for "rigorous selection in appointing, or retaining in their posts, the commanders of large formations" and concluded with a threatening warning:

> My recent circulars concerning judgements upon the fitness of general officers for promotion are all inspired by this principle, which I reaffirm here once again and recall as a solemn warning to all.

> The Chief of the General Staff of the Army
> L. Cadorna

On the morning of 12 May, hundreds of Italian batteries opened fire in the central sector of the Isonzo front. The action subsequently spread to the wings, until from Tolmino to the sea there rose a single roar in which 2,300 guns and 1,000 trench mortars took part. The expenditure planned for the two days of preparation was one million shells. The fire appears to have been particularly accurate. Capello himself, on other occasions so severe towards the use of artillery, declares:

> The fire carried out was true precision fire. The gunners knew the value of every individual round; they did not allow themselves to become intoxicated by the noise; they fired accurately...

The Italian command nevertheless cherished many illusions about the possibility of destroying enemy positions with artillery, many of which were installed in caves. Guelfo Civinini, a war correspondent evidently drawing upon information released by the General Staff, reported during the night of the 13th-14th:

> For month after month, from ground observation posts and aeroplanes, every Austrian gun has been kept under constant Italian observation. However hidden, dug in or sheltered behind hollows and slopes, all were discovered, fixed and followed by a gaze that never left them... For month after month, not one shell of the daily Austrian fire has reached our lines on the Karst without its origin being meticulously recorded from several points and mutually checked with chronometer and goniometer... Every Austrian battery that has faced us on the Karst during these months possesses a perfect criminal record... Certainly there is always a gap between theory and practice. Between the tremendous precision of the gun and the rigorous specification of the target there is an element of imprecision: man. This cannot fail to introduce some imperfection into the equation. But it will be a negligible imperfection, which can be compensated by a few additional rounds...

It was the journalistic version of an instruction manual. Civinini could not know, in connection with the "tremendous precision" of guns, that during the debate held in secret committee in the French Parliament one month later it would emerge that even the brand-new Schneider 155-millimetre pieces, extensively used in the offensive against the Chemin des Dames, had shown dispersions of fire of up to five hundred metres.

II, VI and VIII Army Corps stood ready to spring along the Middle Isonzo front. XXIV Corps remained in reserve. The attack extended from Plava to the Vipacco. To the south, VIII Corps, supported by the left wing of the Third Army, was assigned the elimination of the Austrian salient of Biglia along the Vipacco valley. To the north, between Plava and Salcano, the Italian regiments were to spring from the floor of the Isonzo valley and climb the steep slopes of the mountain chain running parallel to the river: Monte Kuk, Vodice, Monte Santo, Veliki Hrib and San Gabriele. These heights plunged towards the river in ravines and precipices up to five hundred metres high.

For many months the mountains on the right bank of the Isonzo had been pierced by long underground works, and communication trenches prepared to allow our troops to appear suddenly above the Isonzo without being harassed by enemy artillery fire.

But, Luigi Barzini transmitted to the Corriere della Sera, the enemy knew, sensed, understood and prepared. He worked at defence as much as we worked at attack. Underground he created shelters, caves, passages and communications. He embedded himself in the rock, excavating whole underground cities lit by electric light and establishing innumerable machine-gun positions in caves, joined to the trenches by deep tunnels.

The small Plava bridgehead across the Isonzo, conquered by the Italians during the first month of war and extending to the edge of the village of Zagora, was battered and tormented by Austrian guns whose

fire was directed from the summit of Kuk, Point 611. Among the ruins of Zagora the opposing trenches approached to a minimum distance of three or four metres. Rifle barrels and machine-gun muzzles projected from a broken wall or the empty socket of a torn-out window to murder any unwary man who dared raise his head. At certain periods survival was possible, whatever Army headquarters thought, only through a tacit modus vivendi between the opposing ranks. In any event, Italian infantry regarded assignment to the trenches beyond Plava as a death sentence to be carried out shortly. Their sacrifice is recalled by the sufficiently explicit lines engraved upon a memorial erected after the war:

> With one hand first and then the other
> the infantryman seized the enemy bank;
> and when both fell severed to the ground,
> he gripped it with his teeth and held it fast.

Below Zagora extended the catacombs of the new underground city, "dark and damp as a mine", in which detachments not engaged in battle sheltered, ready to counterattack.

The assault upon Kuk was particularly fearsome. The mountain had acquired a sinister reputation and was spoken of as a legendary and terrifying being. More than sixty caves, open on both sides, had been constructed by the Austrians; some were capable of holding up to five hundred soldiers. Kuk was a natural fortress whose offensive power had been enriched by human labour.

Supplying the Plava bridgehead with troops and material had been an extremely difficult task for the Italians, costing great labour, much blood and heavy waste. Until a few weeks earlier, only one road reached the bank of the Isonzo. There, in a confined space fully exposed to the enemy, motor vehicles were unloaded and their cargo transferred by hand or on mule back across the precarious pontoon bridge.

Towards the end of April a second road was opened, the road of the "thirty-two hairpins", named for its thirty-two sharp bends, which provided drivers and passengers with superfluous excitement. This more than doubled the bridgehead's daily supply capacity.

Throughout 13 May our artillery fire continued beneath a brilliant sun, but towards evening the sky darkened with storm clouds. Lightning and thunder of natural origin mingled with the roar of the guns and the bursting of shells. A no less violent storm must have agitated the mind of General Garioni, commander of II Army Corps deployed opposite Kuk and Vodice, who during the day was struck by an unexpected torpedo launched by General Capello.

Army headquarters had sent, as was normal practice, a General Staff officer to the subordinate command as liaison officer. Listening to the conversation of some colleagues of II Corps who spoke with little confidence of the frontal assault on the enemy line, he considered it his duty to inform Capello. The "report" had an immediate effect. Capello told Cadorna that II Army Corps had grown soft after many months of inactivity and had reached a kind of tacit truce with the Austrians: you do not trouble me and I do not trouble you. Moreover, the man to be torpedoed was sceptical about the chances of success; he lacked faith in the result. It would therefore be advisable, in accordance with the strict rules issued by the Generalissimo two days earlier, to replace him. Would Cadorna object if Capello's Chief of Staff, General Badoglio, were sent to take his place?

Cadorna had no objection. Thus Badoglio, who one year earlier had been only a lieutenant colonel, gained at the age of forty-five the honour of commanding an army corps. Although one of his loyal admirers says that he accepted the "extremely difficult task" in a spirit of sacrifice, Badoglio automatically found himself in an impregnable position. He assumed command one day before the infantry sprang forward and could obviously change nothing in the arrangements made by his

predecessor. If the attack succeeded, the merit would be his; if it failed, the blame could be shifted to the "weak" Garioni. Together with Garioni, his innocent Chief of Staff was also put ashore and replaced by an officer trusted by Badoglio, Colonel Ago.

The bombardment continued throughout the night of the 13th-14th. As morning advanced, anxiety increased among the many divisions assigned to the assault in the Gorizia Zone. At noon, after firing toxic-gas shells during the final hours, the artillery fell silent. It had fired for fifty-five consecutive hours. In the ensuing silence, the cries of "Savoy!" could be heard from the infantry going forward with fixed bayonets.

Like swarms of ants, the infantrymen began climbing the precipitous slopes. Scattered among them were line markers carrying large boards on their backs so that our artillery might know at every moment the furthest point reached. They were clearly visible to our men and also to the enemy, who had every interest in exterminating them, even to the extent of using cannon fire for target practice upon them.

It was immediately apparent that the enemy artillery was far from out of action. Although the Austrians possessed no more than half as many pieces as we did, their equipment was better and their supply of shells unlimited. Civinini himself, writing on the evening of the 14th in open contradiction of what he had reported only a few hours earlier, observed:

> Rigid faces blackened by the smoke of explosions moved out from the shelters upon which the enemy artillery raged. In every trench voices combined an affectionate word and a violent one in the command: Boys, out!
>
> The enemy artillery falls like a hurricane of fire upon our ranks. The fury of the fighting surpasses every possibility of desolation... As soon as the first of our ranks emerged, the Austrian fire, which even during our bombardment had opposed it with unprecedented violence, increased that violence tenfold. Those ranks disappeared among the explosions in a monstrous boiling of overturned earth, shattered rock, fire and iron. Other ranks sprang forward behind the first. Driven back by the insurmountable barrier, they returned, advanced again in a furious surging, like men fighting against a cataclysm...
>
> Night and the hurricane which again broke from the sky this evening have lessened the fury without extinguishing it. In the darkness the earth trembles and roars without rest.

This piece of journalism represented the limit permitted to the boldness of a war correspondent. Guelfo Civinini, a man from Livorno whose tongue was entirely free of hair, had already experienced some trouble with the Supreme Command for descriptions that were realistic and too rich in detail.

From the Plava bridgehead, the Udine Brigade attacked Point 383 and took it in a single rush. It had barely time to entrench before Austrian artillery began pounding it. The Firenze and Avellino Brigades, whose task was to capture Kuk and Vodice, crossed the Isonzo on footbridges and immediately encountered fierce resistance. Firenze, the 127th and 128th Infantry Regiments, divided into five columns, attacked Kuk frontally, "defying a terrible interdiction fire". Four of the five columns, though protected by two hundred Italian guns whose fire converged upon the summit, were thinned and halted halfway up the slope. The fifth reached within a few metres of the summit and stopped at nightfall to spend the night in that uncomfortable position.

Meanwhile Avellino, the 231st and 232nd Infantry Regiments, despite suffering horrible losses, reached the ridge joining Kuk to Vodice, captured part of the Zagomila forts and advanced along the watershed towards Kuk's summit. On the afternoon of the 15th, after the colonel commanding the 232nd Infantry had fallen in battle, the summit was reached. The fighting was not over, however, because the Austrians, most of them Dalmatian by nationality, continued a stubborn resistance inside the caves where they had

taken refuge while awaiting possible relief. They had to be driven out with hand grenades and machine-gun fire directed into the western entrances. Furious hand-to-hand fighting with the bayonet also took place, although many Austrians succeeded in withdrawing through the eastern exits.

As soon as the summits changed hands, Austrian artillery began to bombard them day and night, assisted by searchlight beams from powerful arc lamps illuminating the battlefield. A group of deserters attempting to surrender to our men was pursued by sabres of light and subjected to extremely violent fire.

In three days of the bitterest fighting, the Udine, Firenze and Avellino Brigades lost three hundred officers and six thousand soldiers, not a few of them put out of action by our own artillery.

The capture of Vodice's summit, Point 652, initially also entrusted to the Avellino Brigade, proved still more arduous. The fighting to climb from Point 524 to the top lasted a week.

Antonio Baldini, who had become a correspondent at the front for the Illustrazione Italiana after a wound received during the first months of war had rendered him unfit for military service, described the first terrible assault on Vodice:

> Hidden among the rocks on the Sabotino ridge, I followed the battle on the Vodice pass like a thief. I shall not know how to tell it. Memory did not know how to retain it.
>
> The artillery shook the entire mountain, and the echoes imprisoned in the gorge of the Isonzo shouted one over another like waves in a storm, waves that at times seemed to foam up to the ridges in order to overflow and free themselves. These lamenting roars helped to place between the precipitous cliffs of Sabotino and the steep slopes of Vodice and Santo some legendary distance of fear. The eyes, almost hallucinated, then wondered how they could read so clearly upon the mountain being fought over directly opposite.
>
> It was like a great page of war spread before me: a dark and scorched page of smoking woods, ruined roads, hot rocks and land worked into terraces by cannon fire - the great page upon which the enemy driven beyond the summits could no longer read. Zagora, erased by the cannon; Zagomila, erased; ruins beaten into fine powder. The spirit ran beneath the ridges of Vodice to find the soldiers who had climbed there a moment earlier: the soldiers of the Avellino Brigade.
>
> It discovered them nested among the stones, infinitely poor and pitifully tiny beneath a low crown of shrapnel bursts. Little groups of mothers' sons: now and then a dreadful globe of black smoke opened among them, covered them with its shadow, and only a moment later did the terrible crash reach our pitying ears. Poor Avellino, not one of your brave sons moved from his position. The marker man still held the little disc upright. At the bottom of the gorge the Isonzo ran a delicate green, as though infused with milk and amber, beneath the shadow of the woods, still thick and dark...

But viewpoints are many. Another figure, also installed upon Sabotino, watched with furrowed brow the "mothers' sons" perched motionless beneath the ridge: General Capello.

> From Sabotino I myself saw units remain passively in Muslim fashion, in close order behind a fold in the ground on the slopes of Vodice under enemy fire, when a change of formation or a leap forward would have removed them from the scourge. This was not courage; it was unconsciousness on the part of the troops and even more on the part of the commanders.

Those men did not know how to manoeuvre, and the machine-gunners did not know the capabilities of their weapons. Capello would see to it as soon as the remnants of the units returned to rest: what was needed was training, training and still more training.

But was it true that our soldiers were foolish enough to play the "Muslims" when there was no need? General Caviglia appears to doubt it:

> At times, from a distance, our battalions were seen lying motionless beneath enemy artillery fire that was decimating them, and it appeared to observers and critics that, had those battalions moved, they could have avoided the losses. The observers did not know that if the battalions had risen they would have been mown down by enemy machine guns, and that this alone was the reason they remained motionless on the ground.

Motionless they remained, although the atrocious torment of enemy artillery was joined by that of our own, at times still more intense. Deputy Marcello Soleri relates:

> When we had already reached Point 656 [8], our artillery, positioned on the opposite Sabotino - its gallery overflowing with spectators and supporters of the battle - continued firing upon that point, although we kept raised the discs intended to signal our presence on the summit. They were not seen because of the poor light, the distance and the dust. Colonel Testafochi clung in vain to the field telephone which the engineer signallers, with magnificent courage, caused to follow us in the advance as it progressed. He tried in vain to inform and persuade Army Corps headquarters that we had reached the summit. I then seized the telephone handle myself, called and succeeded in speaking personally to General Badoglio, commander of our Army Corps. I confirmed that we were on Point 656 [9] and begged him to have the artillery fire shifted. When he appeared to doubt our assertion, I shouted excitedly: "General, if you do not believe us, come and see." He was persuaded, but when he later visited me in hospital he said that he had left such a reply unpunished only because it came from me!

One may wonder what would have happened had such a peremptory demand been addressed to Badoglio by someone other than a member of Parliament.

In such conditions it is understandable that many "mothers' sons" fell prey to a melancholy apathy, that a dark sense of inevitability and almost an unconscious desire for suicide dwelt within them. Corporal Felice Grazioli had written to his family on 11 May:

> I am resigned to everything, even to giving my twenty-five years, provided that this tragic hour which Providence tolerates for its undoubted purposes of goodness may end in Justice...

The first part of his wish was granted, for he fell in battle three days later. Those who bore responsibility for deciding, however, were not weakened by such fragile feelings. General Boroevic, keeping a watchful eye upon Trieste, was not diverted by what was happening on the Bainsizza or by the pleading lamentations of the commander of Austrian XVI Corps. Vodice was nevertheless an important position and had to be held.

The 106th Landsturm Division had just arrived from the Russian front, its departure having been reported by the Russians on 20 April, and had camped in the Vipacco valley. On the evening of 12 May the assembly sounded for those elderly territorials, whose disappointing performance against the Russians was well known. With packs and legs upon their shoulders, they were sent towards Vodice, arriving exhausted on the evening of the 14th and immediately beginning to fight. They had the widest opportunities to redeem themselves and cover themselves with glory, and they used them.

Clinging to positions two hundred metres below Vodice's summit, the infantry of the Palermo Brigade, sent as reinforcement, remained crouched throughout the afternoon of the 15th, struck down by Austrian guns firing in enfilade from Kronberg. The reserves were then called forward: VI Alpini Group and the 53rd Division under General Prince Gonzaga. Metre by metre they succeeded in climbing the mountain's slopes and preparing for the final leap, launched on the morning of the 20th and completely

successful. The head of the Rohot valley, whose strange name possessed a biblical resonance, was also reached, but every attempt to advance towards Kobilek in the heart of the Bainsizza failed.

All the counterattacks - more than twenty were counted - were beaten back with heavy losses to the attacker. On the morning of 28 May the enemy succeeded momentarily in setting foot again upon the summit. Yet remaining on the bare top swept by artillery was terrible. In eight days the twenty-six battalions employed in the capture of Vodice lost five hundred officers and eleven thousand men.

Baj-Macario summarises the ordeal of Vodice in these terms:

> The divisional commander [of the 53rd Division], the iron General Gonzaga, had established his command post a few hundred metres from the first trench. By his presence he inspired the battalions and by ruthless energy sustained them. Up there was hell: the losses were enormous, infectious diseases spread, and the work of digging trenches was exhausting. Beneath the bombardment the notes of national and martial hymns played by the divisional band rang out. Only with an iron fist could Vodice be held.

A struggle equally epic took place for possession of Monte Santo. The height rose one and a half kilometres as the crow flies from the Isonzo and about six hundred metres above the river. A monastery had been built upon the summit in the sixteenth century, a destination for devout pilgrimages in peacetime. By 14 May 1917, however, nothing remained of monastery and church but fragments chewed by artillery fire. Among the ruins the feverish and anguished Austrian defenders were barricaded with several field batteries.

The thankless task of climbing the mountain's steep slopes fell to the Campobasso Brigade, the 229th and 230th Infantry Regiments, incorporated in the 10th Division. The brigade commander intended to attempt a frontal assault up the steepest slope under the protection of artificial smoke clouds. He had proposed this laborious but simple manoeuvre because he had been informed that the slopes of Monte Santo were lightly defended, while Veliki Hrib and the Dol saddle were strongly held.

General Capello and the commander of VI Army Corps, General Gatti, were convinced instead that Monte Santo would fall through envelopment from Plava and San Gabriele:

- By the time you arrive, our men will already be on the summit of Monte Santo.

The orders therefore provided for an attack upon Veliki Hrib and the Dol saddle, while only one battalion, the 3rd Battalion of the 230th Infantry, was to engage the defenders of Monte Santo frontally.

What happened instead was that the units launched against Veliki were scattered and repulsed by Austrian fire, and the Ionio Brigade, which was to force the Dol saddle, could not even leave its trenches. The isolated battalion, however, moved unseen along the valley floor and climbed the ledges on hands and knees, succeeding at five in the afternoon in unexpectedly setting foot among the trenches dug through the monastery ruins. Thus, through a mistaken assessment by Army headquarters, a frontal attack in strength had been rejected precisely where it would have had the greatest success. The consequences were not slow in appearing.

The battalion commander, gravely wounded, was replaced by a young captain from Trieste, Giulio Slataper, brother of Scipio. Austrians who did not surrender were exterminated; the remnants of the garrison were taken prisoner, including a major commanding an artillery group, and all his guns were captured. During the evening and night, however, a violent destructive fire swept the bare summit, and several Austrian companies were launched in counterattack.

What followed is related differently by various sources. According to General Capello:

> Our men lingered and allowed themselves to be distracted around the ruins of the church; they were counterattacked, surrounded and in turn captured. The supporting battalions had proceeded slowly up the mountain slopes and did not arrive in time to support the first battalion.

Capello then launches into a philippic against our mentality, which inspired "that state of mind of thoughtlessness and frivolity... which led men to consider the task finished at the instant when the objective had somehow been reached". His second observation concerns the action of the reserves, "which was always difficult to harmonise with that of the front line".

General Capello had comfortably installed himself at Villa Toifenbach in Vipulzano and from there nervously followed the course of the battle. Powerful telescopes had been set up in the garden, through which it was possible to see even the soldiers clinging to the mountain slopes fifteen kilometres away. Viewed through a telescope, the battle appeared slow and the men taking part in it lazy. Luigi Barzini gained the same impression - and described it only as an "impression" - while watching from Sabotino the infantry climbing the slopes of Kuk and Vodice.

It is scarcely credible, however, that the conquerors of Monte Santo were distracted on the evening of the 14th. As for the delayed arrival of reinforcements, this was probably the decisive cause, and part of the responsibility went back to Capello himself. In any event, the order to reinforce the brave battalion was issued by General Lo Curcio, commander of the 10th Division, only during the afternoon, when the momentary success had been secured but it was already too late.

The survivors were taken prisoner, including the brave Slataper, who escaped the gallows through the false name under which he had enlisted. After an attempt to blame the failure upon the troops' inability to manoeuvre over the ground, General Lo Curcio was selected as scapegoat and dismissed. Bissolati, returning from the front, told Malagodi that Lo Curcio was:

> an artillery general [he had previously commanded the artillery of II Army Corps] who, transferred to the infantry, could not form an accurate idea of distances and believed that the reinforcements could arrive in one hour when three were required.

The struggle for Monte Santo did not cease. Perched two hundred metres below the summit, large patrols waited for reinforcements to arrive and lend a hand. The next day the assault was repeated and ended in failure. On the 19th an assault platoon again reached the summit but was immediately driven off.

The attempt was repeated the following day under General Capello's personal supervision. He was receiving a French military mission and, no less, a Japanese one. The Japanese had unleashed observer missions almost everywhere and were attempting to learn from the Westerners the art of killing so many people so quickly. Deputy Gasparotto was also passing through on his way to the Karst with his regiment:

> At this moment the infantry are biting into the crest of Monte Santo, all white like an old wall freshly stripped of plaster. Little grey ants, far away, walk, stop, resume and disappear among caves and ruins. All men going to die. The General calls a senior officer and says:
>
> "The artillery must fire not upon the front but upon the wings," and with his stick nervously draws a curve upon the gravel of the garden.
>
> The officer repeats the order by telephone.
>
> At noon the halt is visible. The infantry press against the monastery ruins.
>
> "The action will continue," says the General. "Let us go to lunch..."

> A characteristic lunch: a flowered and talkative table before an open window looking upon the broadest battlefield.

While Capello, displaying formidable learning, held his own against every question asked by his visitors, Monte Santo was not taken for the fourth time.

The capture of Monte Santo was becoming an obsession. On 23 May a more complicated manoeuvre was attempted, following the original plan of frontal investment but completing it with two pincer attacks from Vodice and the Dol saddle. This attempt too was bloodily repulsed by a Ruthenian brigade. The last attempt was made on the 25th and failed like the others. Second Army headquarters had to accept that Monte Santo was bleeding its divisions at an intolerable rate and that there was no choice but to renounce the effort. The troops permanently entrenched themselves eighty metres below the summit and remained there for many months in conditions of suffering and danger that are easy to imagine.

Under Capello's orders, the projected grand enveloping action towards Kobilek and Jelenik was reduced to a demonstrative thrust at Bodrez. During the night of the 14th-15th, the bridge troops rapidly and silently lowered boats running upon rubber wheels, across which a bridge was thrown. A Bersaglieri battalion and an Alpini battalion of the 47th Division crossed it and found the village of Bodrez burned to ashes, the ground yellowed and scorched by toxic gases, and the Austrian garrison of four hundred men surprised and stunned. All were captured. With Austrian reserves approaching, however, the small Italian detachment was recalled during the night of the 18th-19th.

Other units of the 47th Division were withdrawn from that sector and sent farther south. They departed with heavy hearts, looking towards Semmer, whose defences were known to be incomplete and whose defenders were in poor condition. They knew they had to climb Vodice, which they ascended "silent, bent beneath their packs, a procession of men condemned to die". The Udine Brigade, attacking once more, reached Point 363 east of Plava and the village of Palievo on 26 May, driving back a regiment of Hungarian Honved and joining the lines captured on Kuk.

Despite the mediocre results obtained between Plava and Monte Santo, it was possible, by the standards of the time and without excessive impudence, to say that the Gorizia Zone offensive had achieved a fair success. In some fashion even the enormous logistical difficulties had been overcome. Trevelyan relates:

> By night and day the scene taking place in the confined space beside the pontoon bridge [at Plava] was truly remarkable. All the material intended to feed the great battle upon Monte Kuk, and all the wreckage flowing back from that violent struggle, had to pass and repass on mule back or human shoulders over the rows of boats swaying upon the rapid current. Under cover of a ruined house immediately beyond the bridge, the wounded were laid in rows upon their stretchers, waiting for ambulances to carry them away from the valley of death. Nearby, within the narrow space, war material brought by lorries was unloaded in piles, collected and carried across the footbridges. Above all this calm and confusion, enemy shrapnel burst in periodic fits of fury, striking the wounded lying there and making the unloading of lorries and loading of ambulances a task demanding all the coolness and energy of the lieutenants and officer candidates responsible for these operations.

In the section south of Monte Santo, however, the results were meagre or outright disastrous. Great quantities of blood were wasted towards the Dol saddle and San Gabriele, of which only the base was touched. The 222nd Regiment of the Ionio Brigade reached Point 333 at Santa Caterina but was later driven back by interdiction fire. East of Gorizia, everything was reduced to the capture of several modest heights, although the troops engaged behaved with great courage.

Matters turned worst on San Marco, which witnessed the destruction of the 48th Division, and in the Biglia sector, attacked by both VIII Corps of the Gorizia Zone and XI Corps of the Third Army. The 4th and 21st Divisions fought uselessly from 14 to 16 May. The Pisa Brigade of the 21st Division, advancing between Dosso Faiti and Volkovnjak, had its waves decimated by artillery and clouds of asphyxiating gas. The survivors had to withdraw to their starting trenches.

Nor did the order to interrupt the bloody and futile attacks always bring relief, since remaining nailed to the few fragments of trench torn from the enemy subjected battalions already severely tested to an unbearable martyrdom. "Below San Marco," an eyewitness relates, "the days pass in torture and feverish agitation. The nerves can endure no more, and bewilderment shows upon transformed faces.

The difference between reality and hope is clearly shown on Map 6 on the following page, where the lines reached are compared with the objectives.

The conduct of the units engaged was everywhere so magnificent as to arouse the admiration even of General Cadorna, normally very sparing with praise:

> The following days, until the 22nd, were days of fighting of unprecedented violence and imperishable glory for our troops.

The price of that glory amounted to fifteen thousand young men lying between Plava and the Vipacco with their boots towards the sun. About forty thousand were wounded. According to the canons of the war of attrition, the conquest of every square kilometre had therefore cost two battalions. A little more than seven thousand Austrian prisoners were taken.

Although the fighting undertaken by the Gorizia Zone continued bitterly until 28 May, it had lost its unified and coherent character by the 17th. After three days of battle, the ammunition depots had been alarmingly depleted and Capello had only six hundred thousand rounds left. Contrary to his desire, or at least his private aspiration, the Supreme Command had not abandoned the original plans, which provided for the greatest effort towards Hermada and Trieste. Indeed, modifying its previous instructions, Cadorna had stopped the return movement of artillery to the Third Army, but had called upon Capello to support the forthcoming action of the Third Army's left wing with all the medium and heavy calibres on his right flank.

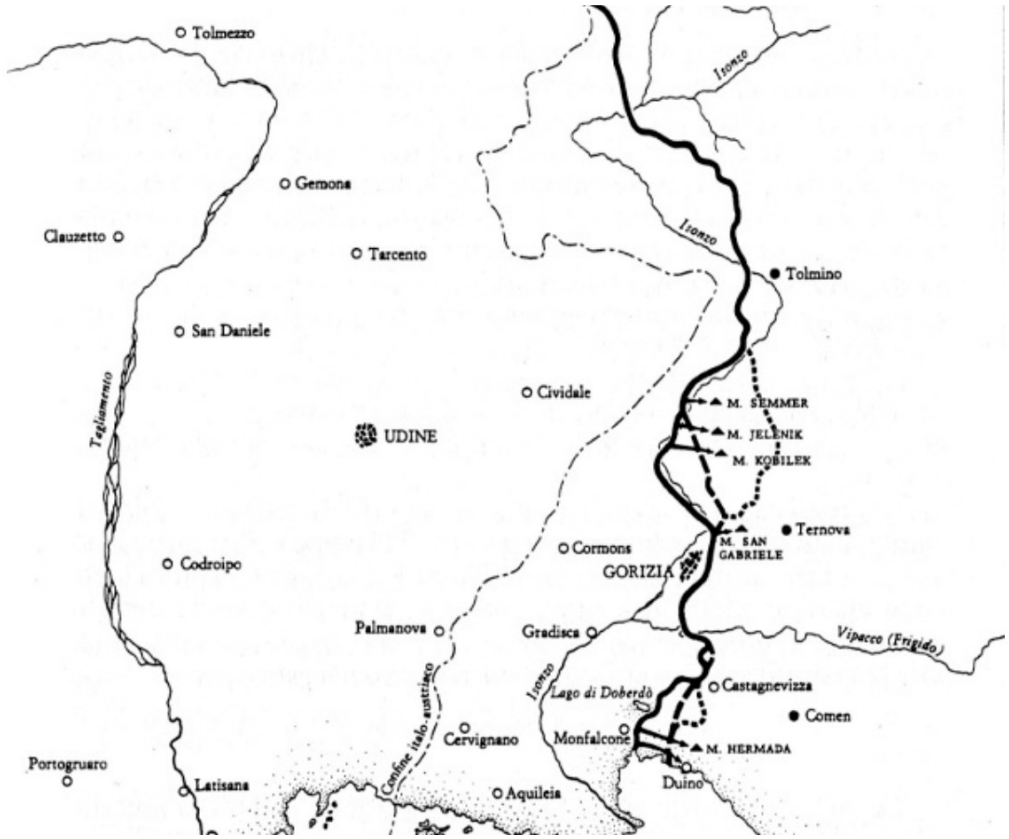
The Third Army was now ready to attack and could wait no longer, because Boroevic had diverted sixty per cent of his reserves towards the Bainsizza. Any further delay, by allowing the Austrian reserves to flow back, would have made still more sterile the sacrifice of so much blood already shed.

Capello was "displeased" by this. From 17 May he prescribed a combat allowance only for the artillery in the central sector opposite Vodice and Monte Santo, while guns on the wings received merely their safety allowance of ammunition. On the same day the commander of the Gorizia Zone explained in writing to the Supreme Command the reasons preventing him from supporting the forthcoming operations of the Third Army more effectively:

> The quantity of ammunition which this command assigned to me after my requests yesterday, and which was indicated to me as the final allocation available for the operation in progress, compels me to reduce the programme of action...
>
> I add that, even with the plan of action restricted, the available ammunition permits me no more than three days of fighting...
>
> In the hope that greater means may later allow me to profit from the positions reached in order to attain the objectives now sacrificed, I repeat that, faced with a painful state of fact which it is not

within my power to change or overcome, I must renounce the broader and more promising development of action that I have outlined here.

Cadorna communicated this letter to the Government. He himself travelled to Rome to discuss with those responsible the possibility of increasing shell production. An increase was almost impossible, however, because the submarine war was severely affecting the importation of essential raw materials. There were strikes as well. The fact was that, after reaching a maximum in April, shell production tended to stagnate at a rather low level for the rest of spring and throughout the summer. Italy still possessed too few shells for too many guns.



6. Initial objectives compared with the final results of the Tenth and Eleventh Battles of the Isonzo. (The solid line indicates the position of the Italian deployment on 12 May 1917; the dashed line, the Italian positions on 19 August 1917; the dotted line, the Italian positions on 6 September 1917. The arrows indicate the initial objectives of the Tenth Battle; the black discs indicate the objectives of the Eleventh Battle.)

If the punch thrown on the Middle Isonzo had crunched against the Austrian wall and managed to knock loose only a few flakes of plaster, it was still a left-hand feint intended to serve as prologue and accompaniment. The plan now called for the right uppercut, delivered by the Third Army. Its task was to move against the intricate defences of the Karst.

An unreal calm had lately settled over the Karst battlefield from Castagnevizza to the sea. The Austrians no longer indulged in jokes, as they had the year before. Italian artillery had become too powerful and could concentrate a heavy fire upon any place from which a single flash appeared; Boroevic himself had admitted this in an interview granted to the Neue Zurcher Zeitung on 12 April.

The soldiers, resigned by a thousand signs to undergoing yet another ordeal, reacted with the indifference of fakirs: they deloused themselves, ate and remained silent as the great day approached. Nor were the reports reaching the waiting troops particularly likely to inspire cheerfulness. Men spoke of heights captured in the Gorizia sector, but also of brigades destroyed, colonels killed and generals removed. Some nevertheless reacted with deliberately optimistic and swaggering talk, as though bold words served as lucky charms.

- I wonder how far we shall get this time.
- Perhaps we shall take Trieste.
- Trieste? Much farther: perhaps we shall reach Vienna.
- But will this really be the last offensive, as they say?
- Of course. They have been promising us that for two years. We have no choice but to believe it.

After all, to defend Trieste the Austrians had only one remaining bulwark, marked by the modest height of 323 metres: Hermada. It was therefore merely a matter of climbing a hill 323 metres high. A few days earlier, at a lecture given to the soldiers of the Salerno Brigade, which with many others was intended to take part in the next leap, Deputy Federzoni, a lieutenant in the trench-mortar arm and an ardent nationalist, had explained precisely that:

> Sabotino was taken in half an hour with only one man wounded! Hermada is much less...

The grey-green crowd had nevertheless answered with a murmur. Another second and anonymous whistles would have risen against the official speaker, to the grave detriment of discipline. Someone sensed the danger and had the happy idea of shouting:

- Do you swear to win? Do you swear it?

The answer was unanimous and compulsory assent.

The front-line trenches and those immediately behind them had been stuffed with an enormous mass of troops, packed so tightly that there was not even room to turn around: sixteen divisions on a front of twenty-five kilometres, supported by 1,250 artillery pieces and about 600 trench mortars. Almost two million shells had been accumulated to overwhelm the enemy defences at any cost. Three-quarters of these resources were deployed along the twelve kilometres from Castagnevizza to Monfalcone, at an average density of one division per kilometre. A small air army of 130 aircraft would support the operations by bombing the summit of Hermada, which was also bracketed by several Armstrong 305-mm guns and the 280-mm guns mounted on two monitors lent by the British. At regular intervals of a few minutes these heavy pieces sent their flying railway wagons towards the mountain, where the shells could be seen exploding in yellow flashes even when the summit was immersed in misty haze. Yet despite this deployment - every shot cost five thousand lire, the price of a motor car - they never managed to hit a giant searchlight which rotated its finger of light, illuminating the remotest rear areas and lending a spectral glow even to the clouds crouching over Udine.

The ground over which the battle was to be fought differed considerably from that around Gorizia and, if possible, was still worse. The region consisted of undulating Karst rock, with deep doline giving access to caves glittering with stalactites and inhabited by bats. Each dolina could be turned into a strongpoint in which whole companies could be tucked away, hidden in the entrails of the earth at moments of danger until the bombardment ceased. Exploiting these possibilities, the Austrians had built a defensive belt several kilometres deep, an entire tangle of catacombs, communication trenches, shelters and tunnels. Danger arose from every point and could attack an advancing force even from behind. Trusting in this type of defence, the Austrians did not fear their numerical inferiority - they were

little more than half as numerous as the Italians - and placed great reliance upon their good weapons, Skoda artillery and Schwarzlose machine guns.

As Luigi Barzini reported to the Corriere della Sera:

> The enemy... has made vast stretches of ground into one immense labyrinth of obstacles and traps... The trenches alone branch and knot themselves in every direction, forming fantastic arabesques...
>
> Hermada, entirely excavated, pierced and cut by deep furrows, has become the great bastion of the enemy artillery. One of the largest concentrations of Austrian guns finds shelter on the reverse slopes and in the caves of the mountain, whose summit offers commanding observation posts.

The Italian attack, originally scheduled for day beta plus four, had been postponed to the 20th and then to the 23rd because of persistent bad weather, which acted as an elixir of long life. The 22nd passed calm and silent, but during the night an extremely violent thunderstorm broke out, accompanied by gusts of fierce wind that increased hardship and exhaustion. In the dazzling light of the lightning, the immense and mysterious Karst truly appeared as a grim and fabulous fortress. The weather forecast was unfavourable for the following day as well, but no further postponement was possible and the order was confirmed.

At dawn on the 23rd, five hundred artillery and trench-mortar batteries opened fire in what immediately appeared an apocalyptic bombardment. For several reasons, however, its effect upon the defenders was comparatively modest. In anticipation of the preparatory bombardment, whose date they knew, the Imperial troops had withdrawn their front-line forces and sheltered them along the reserve line, the Reservestellung, beyond the range of the trench mortars.

Towards noon the wind rose again. Its consequences were described very differently according to whether the observer stood near the High Commands or among the troops in the front-line trenches.

Barzini wrote:

> A light bora drove the fabulous expanse of cloud towards the Adriatic, and the prodigious jets of the explosions, black, massive and excessive, all leaned beneath the pressure of the wind like a fantastic multitude in flight...

Observing the artillery fire from a distance then suggested the most enthusiastic comments to him:

> A marvellous order guided that hell. Every shot fell accurately and regularly. The terrible fire followed algebraic precision... The infantry massed for the assault appeared lost in a simoom. They sent regular, brief and cold messages. Here the gap is open: morale excellent. Concentrate a little more fire on point A: morale excellent. From every part of our line, hidden by the hurricane, the communications repeated: morale excellent...

According to Luigi Ambrosini, correspondent of La Stampa, the "light bora" was instead a fierce and intermittent wind blowing south-east to north-west [10], which:

> rose towards noon and added its whistles to the screams of the shells... It caused no harm to the effects of the fire; indeed, it helped clear the targets.

The troops massed in the front line at an incredible density saw a far less promising spectacle. Shells deflected by the wind missed many of the targets supposedly cleared by the "light bora". As for the trench mortars, whose very short range made their fire particularly sensitive to wind, they almost threw their projectiles backwards onto our own troops. In the end, most of the gaps in the wire were not opened. Moreover, contrary to its usual practice, the Austrian artillery responded almost immediately to our preparatory fire with a violent counter-preparation. While their soldiers, crouching in comparative

safety, suffered modest losses, ours, preparing to leap out, were slaughtered at many points in their starting trenches.

Meanwhile the hour of destiny approached: four in the afternoon. The Karst now resembled a fragment of a dead planet, which was at least an encouraging sight for those who had to attack. Morale was also raised by swarms of carabinieri unleashed immediately behind our troops. Perhaps they were unnecessary, but the Army had grown suspicious after a regiment mutinied when ordered into the line.

At last, on command, the battalions ran out through the prepared gaps and hurled themselves towards the unknown, only a few dozen metres away. The waves were swallowed in a vast cloud of dust and for some time nothing more was known.

Under the Supreme Command's intentions, the Third Army's operation was to be demonstrative on the left wing from the Vipacco to Castagnevizza, and decisive from Castagnevizza to the sea. It was to approach Hermada by frontal assault, eliminating the dangerous salient of Hudi Log, which the Italians had translated literally as Boscomalo. XI Corps, already worn by the previous supporting operations for the Gorizia Zone, was assigned the demonstration; XIII and VII Corps the decisive action. XIV, XXIII and XXV Corps, in immediate support, were to feed the first-line corps continuously.

Alongside the old brigades, whose formation dated from before the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy - the Grenadiers, Acqui and Pinerolo Brigades - stood many newly formed brigades raised during the previous winter, whose regiments all bore numbers above two hundred and were being tested by fire for the first time.

Because the Austrians were ready to receive us, the simple act of leaping from the trenches was not without emotion. Carlo Salsa gives some idea of it in his account of the last action in which he took part [11], during which he was captured:

> Out, lads!
>
> As the first men fling themselves through the open gaps, the sky suddenly explodes as though an atmospheric conflagration had been unleashed. A blast falls upon us and blinds us. Shrapnel shells arrive in an accurate succession upon the trench and the bullets smash in handfuls against the rear slope, splintering the rock.
>
> A stone strikes my lip: one drop of blood, nothing.
>
> Nothing can be heard now but an immeasurable reverberation that envelops us, prevents us from speaking and pins us for an instant in extraordinary stupefaction.
>
> The soldiers throw themselves onto the floor of the trench, heads between their hands. Beyond the parapet, as far as the enemy lines outlined along the slope opposite, the barrage raises a storm curtain torn open by flashes springing from earth and sky.
>
> To our left I see the Grenadiers pouring from their shelters like an emergence of insects.
>
> We too must go out, so as not to leave a rent in the assault wave.
>
> "Out, out!"
>
> I seize one soldier like a bundle.
>
> "Lieutenant, sir, shoot me, but I won't go out..."

> I hoist him to the edge of the trench and the mass plunges forward, bent double, and disappears. One by one they all climb, clinging to the revetments, hesitate for an instant and hurl themselves headlong into the swirling cloud.
>
> At the bottom of the trench I see a confused cluster: the machine-pistol section remains clinging to the rock and cannot tear itself away.
>
> I shout something, but understand that nothing will move them from there. We shall lack connection on the right, but there can be no more delay.
>
> As I grip the side to climb out, a shell swells its instantaneous cloud in front of the gap and its blast throws me back.
>
> Go! I am outside. Four or five men follow me, running in single file. We throw ourselves down the slope, which heaves and smokes like volcanic ground.

Nor was this an isolated case. Another eyewitness, Lieutenant Arturo Stanghellini, liaison officer of the Pinerolo Brigade, described the beginning of the first assault in the central sector as follows:

> ... At Udine there was neither intelligence nor heart, and the following morning, with the regiments massed in the communication trenches at an incredible density, the preparatory fire began. Contrary to its custom, the enemy replied with a violent counter-preparation.
>
> The first, second and third lines, the doline filled with men and the congested communication trenches were hammered with atrocious fury and persistence. The Catanzaro and Salerno Brigades were almost pinned in the front line. The Pinerolo, which was to overtake them in a formidable wave, had lost its best strength before reaching the front line, and the few elements that bravely emerged for the attack passed over the dead of the two preceding brigades and exhausted themselves in fragmentary actions, in episodes of unfortunate heroism...

Leaping from the trenches shouting "Savoy!" - although many, even when intoxicated with brandy, added under their breath, "Holy Virgin, protect me" - our infantrymen found themselves facing a true curtain of fire that seemed impossible to cross. Yet following the Supreme Command's precept that in such circumstances the best chance of safety lay in moving forward, approaching the enemy trenches closely enough that the opposing artillery would hesitate to fire for fear of hitting its own soldiers, those courageous men made the great leap and vanished into the deadly clouds.

The fortunate emerged farther on and continued running with their rifles held crosswise in both hands. There the caverned machine-gun nests awaited them, awakening at precisely the right moment to mow them down. They fell by the thousand with arms raised in a desperate gesture of agony and plunged into a starless night. Those who reached the Austrian fighting positions engaged in furious hand-to-hand combat and took the first prisoners.

In this sector too, Austrians who, sensing the approach of the supreme moment that would decide life or death, prudently tried to surrender and desert were subjected to accurate fire by their own comrades.

Everywhere the ground was covered with our soldiers and the enemy's. Many had ceased suffering, but very many groaned and begged for mercy. Mercy, however, was dead. Wounded men without the strength to drag themselves to shelter, who remained on the tracks followed by supporting detachments, were literally trampled to death beneath hobnailed boots worn by hurried and indifferent feet.

Congestion behind our lines was enormous: communication trenches blocked with infantrymen waiting for their hour, ammunition and food carrying parties, crowds of limping wounded, and stretchers bearing the more serious cases, which the bearers dragged unsteadily for several kilometres before

making the same journey again several times in a day. As soon as possible, a doctor tied around each wounded man's neck, "with a scrap of string, the card upon which his injury and destiny were written", as D'Annunzio sang in the Prayer of Doberdo. Amid such confusion, the silence of the men was astonishing, as though they were attending a funeral vigil.

The fate of the troops attacking north of Castagnevizza as far as the Frigido was tragic. Theirs was supposed to be a demonstration: they were therefore to engage, but with a certain prudence. Their end is exemplified by the official history of the Italian brigades in its account of the fighting involving the Lecce Brigade of the 63rd Division, XXV Corps, deployed between Volkovnjak and Dosso Faiti:

> On the 22nd a difficult trial is assigned to the Lecce Brigade: to seize the heights from Point 196 to Tamburo, Point 236, that is the ridge between the small valleys of Orzeni and Spacapani and the trenches surrounding Point 236; and to act demonstratively against those which run from north of Tamburo, through Point 140, to Point 126, relying solely upon its own forces.
>
> The decisive attack is entrusted to I and II Battalions, 265th Regiment, and III Battalion, 266th Regiment. III Battalion, 265th, forms the regimental reserve; the demonstrative action is entrusted to I Battalion, 266th. II Battalion, 266th, forms the brigade reserve.
>
> The units spring courageously from the trenches in the afternoon of the 23rd, but the intensity of the enemy fire checks every impetus. The first waves of I/265th are almost annihilated. Those of II/265th manage to reach, with only a few men, the vicinity of the enemy outposts, but cannot be supported by subsequent waves because the interdiction fire is murderous. Those of III/266th reach the floor of the Spacapani ravine and climb it as far as contour 200, but, violently struck on the flank by artillery and machine-gun fire from Point 126, they advance no farther. Only after a tenacious effort do a few courageous men succeed in reaching the summit of Point 236 by the south-western slope of Tamburo; but they must immediately withdraw before far superior forces in order not to be taken prisoner. Since the battalions of the 265th cannot assist in the occupation of the said height, I/266th advances, crosses the small saddle of Volkovnjak, descends towards the Spacapani ravine and reaches the little wood at Point 218. An infernal fire, however, prevents it from proceeding and supporting the action of III/266th.
>
> At nightfall, the troops, which have been unable to secure any other advantage, reorganise the positions occupied.

After two days of fighting of such violence, the brigade, which had lost forty-six officers and 1,760 men, was withdrawn.

Elsewhere too, the "demonstrative" attacks ended in dreadful hecatombs. The 58th Division, attempting to move from Faiti towards Plenski, was halted immediately with extremely heavy losses. A very bloody struggle also developed for possession of Castagnevizza, attacked by the Barletta Brigade of the 4th Division.

A platoon of assault troops of the 139th Infantry managed to enter the village ruins, carried forward by the courage of a nineteen-year-old officer candidate, who was immediately killed by a burst from a machine gun hidden among the wreckage. Other troops then arrived, occupied the village and tried to pass beyond it, but were subjected to an extremely violent concentration of enemy artillery. Meanwhile, from the mysterious catacombs branching through cellars and beneath the ruins, detachments of Austrian machine-gunners and flamethrower units emerged behind the attackers, who were also attacked frontally by other troops sent from Novelo. Austrian artillery positioned on Stole and at Temnizza continued pounding both contestants, who hunted each other with small arms, without first enquiring into the colour of their uniforms.

Castagnevizza remained in practice no-man's-land, and the Italians clung to the railway loop two hundred metres west of the village. The Barletta Brigade, which had lost 2,700 men, including about ninety officers, in a day and a half, had to be hurriedly withdrawn.

The central effort was made by XIII Corps, composed of the 31st, 34th and 33rd Divisions. The 34th Division, formed by the Salerno and Catanzaro Brigades, was commanded by General Porta, a good-natured and courageous giant of a Milanese who cursed telephones because they worked when they were unnecessary and broke down when they would have been useful:

- They've always fought wars without telephones, ever since Eve, and things always went well! Now we've got the telephone for chatter and things go damned badly.

The infantry emerged from the trenches precisely on time. Although the Austrians had evacuated the most threatened positions here too, they had left groups of desperate men who were required to "sacrifice themselves"; some were found tied to the machine-gun tripod. Those who had not died were captured, stunned and mad with terror. The Catanzaro Brigade quickly reached the ruins of Lukatic and the enemy's third line at Point 238. More than one thousand prisoners were taken.

But the enemy reaction increased in intensity. The battalion that had reached Point 238 was subjected to an apocalyptic concentration of heavy shells which tore the men to pieces, and the survivors had to withdraw. Frescura, who was present at the action, commented:

> Few wounded men pass. It is impossible to carry them all away from this hell. They die on the battlefield.
>
> The Austrian line has been reached only in part; it is impossible to go farther. Our losses are appalling. The Austrians have all their guns here. They too cannot be cheerful. But we had dreamed of the breakthrough, the pursuit, cavalry at their backs...

Meanwhile the Salerno Brigade painfully and bloodily opened a path towards the road to Versic, which it reached. Other battalions reached positions south of the Boscomalo fortified complex and penetrated the almost surrounded village.

At sunrise the following day the struggle began again. While it proved impossible to advance farther, the enemy counterattacked violently and was contained with the assistance of the Pinerolo Brigade.

Acts of courage were beyond counting, but the most macabre was certainly that of an engineer soldier whose leg had been almost severed by a shell. He completed the amputation with a knife, raised the limb before his comrades and shouted words of encouragement to them. He died from loss of blood a few hours later.

The brigades so committed burned out rapidly. During the night of the 24th-25th, the Catanzaro was relieved by the Lario, while the Salerno was withdrawn during the night of the 25th-26th after losing more than half its strength in three days. The hecatomb among its officers was appalling: 115 were out of action - forty-five killed or missing and seventy wounded - virtually the entire complement. The Pinerolo was no better off. Having lost sixty-five officers and 2,235 men in only two days, it had to be withdrawn immediately.

The 31st and 33rd Divisions operated respectively to the left and right of the 34th. The 33rd was commanded by Major General Andrea Graziani, as inflexible as Porta was indulgent. Graziani, who was not in the habit of decimating or choosing men at random, had demonstrated his severity three days earlier by having a soldier of the Mantova Brigade put against a wall. Drunk and having come to blows with a comrade, the man had struggled badly with an officer attempting to calm him. He was from Novara, supported his mother and had a sister in an asylum. While a kind of trial was being conducted,

his coffin was already being built. He died, according to a memorial printed by his native municipality, "in Christian resignation".

The infantry of the 33rd, starting from Nad Bregom, were also to move towards Selo. During the first stages of the assault, because of the density of troops in the line, they became mixed with units from other divisions and even other corps, all scattered irregularly, either too far forward or too far behind the neighbouring units. General Graziani, "first among the foremost", tried to bring some order to the chaos, but in a highly individual manner, hunting fugitives with his carbine and becoming impossible for his officers to find when they vainly sought instructions.

As darkness fell, disorganisation increased and a rumour spread that one of our battalions had already occupied Selo. The troops extended between Castagnevizza and Iamiano therefore did not know whether they should open fire or advance without cover to join supposedly friendly units. Selo, however, remained firmly in Austrian hands. During the night, some disoriented units entered no-man's-land and were captured. At last the Mantova Brigade, after fighting of exceptional violence, managed to advance one kilometre. There it was halted by violent counterattacks and throughout the following day had to endure a storm of fire that decimated its ranks. Only at dusk on the 24th could it establish contact with elements of the Barletta Brigade coming from Castagnevizza.

The complete conquest of the intricate Boscomalo system required a great number of victims. The Cosenza Brigade - 234th and 244th Infantry - which together with the Lario formed the 31st Division, lost 2,400 men in a day and a half while attempting to support the Salerno beyond Versic. The Acqui Brigade lost another 2,000 in that forest of trenches while trying from Castagnevizza to support the 31st Division.

The advance on Selo from the west was assigned to the 23rd Division, formed by the Grenadiers and Siena Brigades. The 1st and 2nd Grenadier Regiments, mixed with units of the Padova and Mantova Brigades, advanced about two kilometres while being continually counterattacked by the Austrians. Miserable little heights passed from hand to hand in a succession of furious struggles. On the 25th the Grenadiers received the order to halt and entrench defensively, while the Siena Brigade replaced them in a fresh assault that failed. After a pause of twenty-four hours, the Siena was again hurled forward, still without success. In those four days the 23rd Division lost 6,000 men.

At the cost of these enormous sacrifices, in the central sector of the Karst front the lines between Castagnevizza and Lake Doberdo - a muddy pool filled with decomposing corpses - were advanced by a minimum of one and a maximum of three kilometres. The further thrust towards Selo, attempted with fresh forces drawn from the reserve corps and continuously fed into the battle, was insufficient. The Italian troops were either pinned to their starting lines or driven back from the small sectors where they had managed to advance.

The general public, however, was not informed of these tragedies. The scale of the losses was kept rigorously secret. Even the death notices of prominent men killed in battle would appear only after some delay, and in any case dots would replace the regiment and locality. In compensation, from the 25th onwards, banner headlines across many newspaper columns proclaimed: "THE AUSTRIAN LINES BROKEN FROM CASTAGNEVIZZA TO THE SEA - NINE THOUSAND PRISONERS CAPTURED - THE IRRESISTIBLE IMPETUS OF THE ITALIAN INFANTRY", and so on.

Maps emphasised the conquests made. They were drawn at such a large scale that one could read metres rather than kilometres. Everything appeared easy upon them: at that average rate Trieste would be reached in two weeks. It was not explained that at that rate of consumption no Italian army would remain after two weeks.

On the southern wing of the Italian deployment, from the Iamiano-Brestovizza valley to the sea, the advance had been somewhat deeper. VII Corps operated in this sector, supported by units of XXVII Corps.

Two hard rocks were represented by Point 77, which constricted the entrance to the valley from the south, and Point 144, which performed the same function on the northern side of the entrance. Near Point 144, three months earlier, Sergeant Benito Mussolini, editor of Il Popolo d'Italia, had been wounded by the explosion of a trench mortar with which he was conducting firing exercises to train his men. Point 77 was a brownish-yellow hill, burned by bombardments which had erased every trace of trenches. No Austrian offensive thrust had ever started from it, unlike its sister position. Yet as soon as Italian units attempted to approach, it revealed its porcupine nature. The silence was suddenly broken and the nest of death disclosed itself. Once the assault was repulsed, the position returned to silence.

Point 144 was overwhelmed by the 2nd Bersaglieri Brigade and the Bergamo Brigade of the 16th Division. The 7th and 11th Bersaglieri, moving along the northern side of the valley, occupied Iamiano, passed Komarie and reached Point 31, from which they received orders to move towards Lower Brestovizza.

An important Austrian headquarters installed in the Tauben Doline was captured intact. The officers, surprised at table, attempted to resist with pistols in hand. On reaching the mouth of the dolina and seeing the Bersaglieri, however, they decided that their adventure had ended cheaply enough and surrendered.

The Bergamo, together with the Gaeta Brigade of the 62nd Division, reached the Austrian second defensive line, the sadly celebrated Flondar Line. It was occupied on the 25th after the fiercest enemy resistance, which used ground-attack aircraft to machine-gun our troops from low altitude. There, however, progress ended. The Bergamo was withdrawn after losing 2,700 men. Its miserable remnants retraced their steps along the valley and met the Siracusa Brigade, which in turn was approaching the firing line. Gasparotto questioned them:

- Who are you?
- We are from Lecco.
- No, I mean which regiment?
- Twenty-sixth Infantry. It is the Bergamo Brigade coming down from Hermada.
- Where are your officers?
- There aren't any. All killed or wounded.

A soldier then related that the officers had fought "like demons", always at their head with revolvers in hand. "They shouted: forward, forward," he added. "But there was no need; we went forward anyway."

The Bersaglieri Brigade, somewhat less badly tried, remained in the line until 2 June, when it was withdrawn and its remnants merged into a single regiment. The rest lasted only a very short time, for the following day the Bersaglieri were sent back into combat.

Along the Adriatic coast, the breakthrough task was assigned to the 45th Division, composed of the Toscana and Arezzo Brigades. It was to creep north of the Lisert marshes and move towards Medeazza and San Giovanni, then attack Hermada frontally and turn it from the south. The region was extremely treacherous because of reed beds and deep water. If there was no water on the Karst and the soldiers died of thirst, here there was decidedly too much. These were the mouths of the Timavo, which was said to be mysteriously fed by underground rivers flowing beneath the limestone, invisible to human sight and perception.

Sacrificing themselves beyond all praise, the Toscana and Arezzo Brigades - composed largely of soldiers from Brescia and Bergamo - captured the terrible Point 77 and the neighbouring heights. By evening on the 24th the 45th Division had already reached the mouths of the Timavo and the first railway viaduct at Duino.

Reaching the mouths of the Timavo aroused the enthusiasm of everyone who knew Latin and Greek. Gasparotto wrote:

> The Timavo! Who has not heard it mentioned at school? Virgil sang it - per ora novem cum murmure montis, at a time when it still followed a different and longer course. Claudian sang it, Martial sang it, and D'Annunzio will certainly sing it, for they say he is nearby as a liaison officer. And how many mouths has the sacred and changeable river? Seven, as Strabo says, or nine, as Virgil says, or... twenty, as someone else supposed?

His attention was immediately seized by less classical thoughts, however, for he continued:

> At two in the afternoon the cyclist Bersaglieri set out with Colonel Paselli. At four several wounded cyclists are already returning. Good heavens, one dies quickly up here...

On 25 May the first direct attack upon Hermada was launched. The struggle was fierce and extremely bloody for several days, but Medeazza, Point 175, could not be captured and the Italian troops established themselves in front of the village. The 62nd Division also took part in the assault on Medeazza with the Murge Brigade. Two battalions of that brigade reached Medeazza on the 25th but were driven back that evening to Point 145 North. The following day the same battalions, reduced by half, took part unsuccessfully in an enveloping attack intended to permit an advance on Duino. Since shells did not spare the hierarchical ladder, the whole headquarters of the Murge, which had taken up quarters in a badly screened dolina to leave the better protected position to a first-aid post, was blown up on the 28th together with General Ricordi.

Farther south, III Battalion of the 77th Regiment finally occupied San Giovanni di Duino. The Austrians withdrew after house-to-house fighting, taking refuge on the small peninsula among the ruins of a large metallurgical works and in the "abysses of San Giovanni", a complex of unexplored caves.

At four in the morning on the 27th, the other two battalions attempted to cross the Timavo. The only footbridge that could be thrown across was held under murderous fire. Bodies of dead and wounded fell with splashes into the water and were swept away by the violent current. The few who reached the hostile bank found intact wire entanglements before them and clung vainly to them, searching for nonexistent gaps. When the operation was suspended and they attempted to withdraw, most were killed or drowned. Everything had to begin again from zero.

The liaison officer attached to the 45th Division was Gabriele D'Annunzio, fresh from a series of reckless flights over the summit of Hermada on the 23rd, for which he had been proposed for his third Silver Medal. With him was his intimate friend, Major Giovanni Randaccio. On the 26th, D'Annunzio and Randaccio distinguished themselves by prodigies of courage. They had with them a great flag twelve metres high which they wished to plant on Duino Castle, giving the people of Trieste visual announcement of the capture of that outpost: a gigantic optical signal transmitted over a distance of fifteen kilometres.

To capture Point 28 beyond the Timavo, which bypassed San Giovanni on the march towards Duino, D'Annunzio and Randaccio devised a better plan. Another footbridge would be thrown across and a fresh battalion would attempt a frontal assault while other troops engaged the Austrians on the flanks. Despite the precarious nature of the footbridge - a single plank "supported by vague floating boxes", D'Annunzio would say - the attack succeeded and at dawn on the 28th the height was captured.

Randaccio, observing the operation from an observation post on the near side of the Timavo, was not reassured. The Austrians on the flanks were resisting vigorously and he perceived the precarious position of the isolated battalion. He therefore sent a hurried appeal:

- Height occupied. Reinforcements urgently required. Four o'clock.

At that moment the enemy counterattack began. The battalion was surrounded and on the point of being overwhelmed and captured. Randaccio saw the collapse, our men retreating precipitately and the Austrians pressing after them. He rushed onto the footbridge but, after only a few steps, was pinned down by a burst of machine-gun fire. His adjutant, himself wounded, dragged him temporarily to safety.

Taken to the hospital at Monfalcone, Randaccio was attended to the end by D'Annunzio, who described his death in epic terms:

> He always answered destiny with the same prompt and brief word:
>
> "Who will go where there is death?"
>
> "I."
>
> This leader of infantry... had shown of what hard temper his courage was made when he remained for ten hours with his skull split, his whole body pierced and torn by bullets and splinters, lying in his blood beside an enemy wire entanglement without losing consciousness, almost holding his life gripped in the claws of his will.

As soon as Randaccio was hit:

> He fell at once, because "he could no longer feel his legs", as he said in a voice which from the beginning mastered the torment and anxiety of death. He thought of his beloved wife and his four children and named them, but kept his face firm and his eyes dry...
>
> Wretched was the bed: it contained his great body exactly like a coffin. Sad was the room, looking through its broken windows upon the glow of the mine. Other wounded and dying men suffered and groaned around him beneath brown woollen blankets. The roar of the cannon shook the walls, already cracked in several places. The wind of the unceasing battle entered and stirred the stained sheets.
>
> To his right lay a machine-gunner wounded in the lung, from which came alternating gurgles and whistles. To his left, on a stretcher, lay something like a clod soaked in black blood: a face entirely erased by a splinter, where breath still rasped among the fragments of the jaws and the clots of mud.

When night descended upon Randaccio:

> He opened his eyelids a little, and through them passed the last flash of his fearless gaze. Upon the lips of the dying man appeared the intention to speak.
>
> I bent over his lips, comrades, and in a breath which passed through my soul like a dazzling beauty, more passionate than any shout, he said: "Long live Italy."

The brave major's name and memory would not fade, for his soldiers would always remember when they climbed:

> ... onto the smoking Veliki,
> clasping the great knife in his fist,
> with the anxious poet
> behind young Randaccio,

who always calls you to the assault,
Grenadier of Tuscany.

Point 28 returned to enemy possession. For the moment, the Timavo marked the boundary between the two opponents.

The advance along the coast had reached four kilometres. During the first thirty-two hours of battle the Third Army had lost 25,000 men; and in the week beginning on Wednesday 23 May, the second anniversary of Italy's entry into the war, the total had risen to 80,000, almost all infantrymen and Bersaglieri. This figure approached fifty per cent of the Third Army's effective strength. Since the army had been divided, so to speak, into two halves - a first-line army and a supporting army - the former had practically been destroyed. At this rate all available men would have been consumed in about ten days of fighting. It was therefore necessary to stop and abandon almost every objective.

The occupied ground did not exceed twenty square kilometres. Over this area the losses were so high that their spatial density equalled the population density of a crowded city. The cost of the ammunition and equipment that had evaporated exceeded one billion lire. The conquered territory had therefore required an investment equal to that of building land in an urban centre.

The bled-white units returning from the Karst offensive looked terrified and shattered. Captain Calori gives us an idea:

> Thus behind me at dawn that May, along the road of that Calvary, descended some two hundred and fifty ragged men caked with mud, towards the peace of the Friulian plain spread before us after so much torture.
>
> With their clothes in rags, their steps swaying, their hair and beards rough and unkempt, faces pale and feverish eyes wide open, they descended dazed and almost unconscious, singing. But the tune had become monotonous, confined to a few notes, and the song sounded like a lament.
>
> At a bend we saw a group of smart Bersaglieri emerge from their huts beneath the road embankment, preparing to go up into the line after their rest.
>
> When we drew near, a lieutenant with a red, clean-shaven face came towards me, speaking my name.
>
> I stopped. My infantrymen halted behind me, continuing to sing under their breath as though in a dream.
>
> ...
>
> We exchanged a few words and were already about to part when B. asked me:
>
> "Is this your company?"
>
> It was like a sudden light that shook me from my torpor and restored consciousness.
>
> I turned my eyes upon that detachment of broken men, the last remnant of my fine regiment, and wept.

On 28 May General Cadorna had already ordered the offensive halted. The Gorizia Zone and the Third Army were instructed to consolidate the ground captured and to consider only limited operations aimed at taking Monte Santo, the Castagnevizza-Stari Lovka line and the slopes of Hermada, so that the

mountain would be within infantry assault range on the next occasion. Such operations were to be undertaken only after careful examination and after weighing the advantages and disadvantages.

The Duke of Aosta went to confer with General Capello in order to agree on the beginning of this new phase. Capello, who did not lack common sense when not carried away by his desire to succeed at any cost, convinced him that operations which had failed despite being integral parts of the offensive just concluded could not be described as isolated actions. To seize those positions, another offensive of no smaller proportions would have to be mounted. It was therefore better to include them in the next large-scale operation, if and when one was undertaken. Emanuele Filiberto agreed with his colleague and both presented these conclusions to General Cadorna.

The Chief of the General Staff accepted their view, and on 30 May issued orders for a new defensive arrangement of the Isonzo front. Several exhausted divisions were replaced, others placed in reserve, and seven brigades and a large quantity of artillery departed for Trentino, where the attack against the Ortigara massif was being organised. The Gorizia Zone was also dissolved, and the Second Army, whose command was entrusted to General Capello, extended its jurisdiction from the Vipacco to Rombon. XII Corps, holding the Carnia sector, again became independent as it had been the previous year.

Everything would therefore have returned to calm had the Austrians not decided on this occasion to disturb the Supreme Command's plans.

The Austrian commander of the army deployed along the Isonzo, Field Marshal Svetozar Boroevic von Bojna, was a Croatian of sporting bearing - he was a good tennis player - and tender heart, who deeply loved his soldiers. On 18 May he had been able to grant them as a reward a mark of recognition from His August Majesty Emperor Charles: the Fifth Army under his orders would change its designation to the "Isonzo Army". "This," he announced in a proclamation to his soldiers, "will spur us to remain worthy of the proud name that honours us."

He expressed his love for his soldiers by refusing to visit the front lines. He sensed that if he saw their agony with his own eyes he would be incapable of issuing the cruel orders he was accustomed to distribute. He therefore directed the war from an office at Postumia equipped with numerous telephones. Yet he did not esteem the telephone as an instrument of command. The few orders he issued therefore left this centre written in black and white, and usually forbade every unit, however decimated, to withdraw under any circumstances. As long as it held, the enemy exhausted himself and the troops reserved for the counterattack remained safely hidden, waiting for the decisive hour of their employment. It was a variation of the method the Germans used with equal success on the Western Front.

Although Boroevic and Colonel Pitreich, head of his operations section, looked confidently upon their solid formations, the course of the battle had not failed to arouse some concern. The Italian attacks had admittedly been "insane". Their insistence upon attacking the same objectives dozens of times regardless of losses did great honour to the rank and file, but far less to their commanders. Boroevic and Pitreich could boast, not without pride, of having resisted brilliantly even though their forces did not exceed three-fifths of the Italian total. Austrian losses too had been considerably smaller, in approximately the same proportion.

Nevertheless, though using costly methods, the Italians had approached Hermada a little too closely. The hill now possessed only one kilometre of breathing space, which was little. If Hermada collapsed, the whole Karst front might indeed collapse.

In other circumstances, the Austrian army would have encountered very little difficulty in crushing the Italian. The Habsburg Empire possessed a population one and a half times that of Italy and a more advanced industrial development. But in June 1917, after almost three years of war and after suffering one million dead and almost two million prisoners and missing, besides several million wounded, Austria was in even worse condition than France. It was exhausting its human potential and had been reduced to extremity. Count Czernin, Foreign Minister, had not without reason told Admiral von Muller on 3 April, showing himself dominated by perhaps excessive pessimism:

> Now I shall tell you something. If the war does not end within three months, the people will end it outside the governments. And I cannot even make a wager with you upon this, because if it happens I shall be unable to pay the bet.

Until then the Austrian Command had gambled among Russia, Italy and the Balkans, and had not always been fortunate. When in May 1916 it decided to attack Italy on the Plateaux and stripped the Russian front, it paid with defeat in Galicia. It had to send reinforcements hurriedly to Galicia, and the Italian army had been able to capture Gorizia.

Now, however, there was revolution in Russia. Clever was the man who understood anything about it; but Russia could not wage war and revolution simultaneously. The thing to do, therefore, was to gamble on the revolution.

The first formation to leave the Russian front was the 106th Landsturm Division, which subsequently defended Vodice. By early June, five more divisions had been withdrawn from the Eastern Front. Of these, the 12th and 21st Schutzen Divisions were sent to reinforce Boroevic, who was invited in exchange to return his most exhausted divisions while retaining their field-artillery allotment on the Isonzo.

With this modest injection of fresh troops, reinforced by the least tired and decimated formations he could gather, Boroevic decided to attack the Italians before they had time to consolidate the positions they had occupied. The lines we had captured had been devastated and overturned by our own fire, and weeks would have been needed to organise them for proper defence. The trenches were still full of Italian and Austrian corpses, which the now scorching sun had turned black as Negroes and which poisoned the air and ground. Moreover, the Italian advance, although very limited, had deprived our troops of the protection of the field guns while placing them beneath the muzzles of the enemy's.

On 1 and 2 June the Austrian artillery displayed suspicious activity. On the 3rd the bombardment extended from San Marco to the sea and the first large patrols were launched. The actual attack, however, began during the night of 3-4 June and continued throughout the following day. Boroevic obtained his most conspicuous success where it mattered most to him: on the slopes of Hermada.

The Italian 20th Division, commanded by the former Minister of War General Zupelli, which had replaced the 45th, disintegrated. The Austrians recaptured San Giovanni di Duino, Point 145 North, held by the Puglie Brigade, and Point 110, reaching the western entrances of the two viaducts on the Monfalcone-Trieste railway. Several thousand of our soldiers had taken shelter inside them from the bombardment and were captured. It was said that three regiments had surrendered without fighting. This accusation, made particularly by the higher ranks, is not fully proved. Many generals tended to infer graver guilt from isolated incidents of indiscipline and intolerance; but the coordinated passage of several thousand men to the enemy would have required premeditation and organisation that certainly did not exist in individual rebellions or even in confused mutinies.

Among the troops involved in the reverse was the 86th Regiment of the Verona Brigade, deployed between Point 110 and the adjacent railway tunnel. More than one thousand soldiers were packed into

the tunnel, which was 110 metres long and seven metres wide, including personnel from many headquarters and the headquarters themselves. When the Austrians suddenly burst in and those units attempted to escape - because, trapped in the tunnel, they had no possibility of defence - both exits were already under hammering artillery and machine-gun fire. Brave officers repeatedly attempted to break out but remained on the ground. The regimental commander himself fell stabbed near the northern entrance.

There was certainly panic as well. The already compressed infantrymen had to make room for several hundred men of the Puglie Brigade retreating in disorder, and they too became bottled up. Very little survived of the Verona and Puglie Brigades. Nevertheless, Captain Cignozzi of the 86th declared: "I feel indignation when the general, the brigade commander, makes certain unkind judgements upon the conduct of the troops."

In any case, the enemy could announce in the bulletin of 5 June that almost 7,000 prisoners had been taken. The Siracusa Brigade, the 245th and 246th Infantry, was also violently attacked farther north. The 246th, holding and defending Point 146, was partly encircled and the height returned to enemy hands. The Austrians immediately installed a searchlight upon it and, lengthening their fire, eventually struck the now distant Point 144, which protected the approach to Lake Doberdo and had to be hurriedly prepared for defence.

There were moments of extreme tension. The colonel of the 245th established himself with his officers in a front-line dolina to direct operations. On the edges of the hollow, kneeling behind a few sandbags with rifles levelled, a group of his soldiers - all lean Sicilians burned by the sun - defended their commander, while a machine-gun company performed miracles in repulsing the Austrians, who in fact did not pass the Flondar Line.

Farther north, between Komarie and Lukatic, we lost a few trench elements, and on Dosso Faiti the line was only slightly gnawed away. The fighting there, as well as on San Marco, was nevertheless extremely bloody. The Italian bulletin of the 4th stated:

> On the western slopes of San Marco the enemy, after completely flattening the defences of our new line with artillery fire, succeeded with an attack in force in penetrating certain advanced elements. Halted by the prompt arrival of reinforcements, he was then decisively driven back to his positions with heavy losses by a subsequent counterattack.

The following day it stated:

> The positions of Dosso Faiti, although completely overturned, were stoutly defended by the infantry of the Tevere Brigade, 215th and 216th Regiments, which after a long struggle and despite extremely violent interdiction fire finally repulsed the enemy...

For Italian units already withdrawn from the front because their strength was exhausted, the Austrian offensive began a new and unexpected odyssey. Hurriedly loaded onto lorries - or simply sent on foot - they were ordered to close the breaches. Particularly pitiful was the fate of the 1st and 2nd Grenadier Regiments, which together with the Siena and Bari Brigades, themselves severely tried, were sent to plug the advance in the central sector.

By repeated counterattacks the Grenadiers managed to halt the Austrian thrust. They were relieved during the night of 4-5 June, but on the morning of the 6th the 1st Regiment was again called upon to fight and, grouped with the Siena Brigade, was sent to capture Points 219 and 235 for the umpteenth time. The operation succeeded. When the Grenadier Brigade was finally sent to rest, however, it had lost since 23 May no fewer than 110 officers and 3,100 soldiers. Thus the "long soldiers" continued

heroically upon their ideal march towards the finishing line of the war: 7,000 dead and 15,000 wounded from a present strength of 6,000 men.

To plug the most dangerous breach on our left wing, the Murge, Arezzo and Barletta Brigades were sent in, although they too had been savagely decimated. The 2nd Bersaglieri Brigade, reduced to a single regiment, was given no less an objective than the recapture of Point 146. Supported by the 260th Infantry of the Murge Brigade, it reached the foot of the position, but found the wire intact and lacked the strength to go farther.

In the end, during the three days of fighting from 4 to 6 June, the Italians were forced back about half a kilometre in front of Hermada, losing the Flondar line whose capture had cost so much blood. It was not much, but Boroevic was satisfied, especially since he could demand no more from his exhausted troops. On the 6th itself enemy activity began to diminish, and during the following days only local fighting broke out, both along the Third Army front and on the Middle Isonzo. The Austrian counter-offensive cost us another 25,000 dead and wounded. We also lost 10,000 prisoners.

Despite this further bloodletting, preparations for the offensive operation in Trentino were not suspended. Hoping that the manoeuvre along interior lines between the Isonzo and Ortigara, which had succeeded in the opposite direction the previous year, might succeed again, Cadorna had rapidly concentrated an army of 180,000 men with much artillery against the Portule Pass. The principal weight of the assault was borne by the 52nd Division, composed of eighteen of the best Alpini battalions. Beginning on 10 June, in extremely bitter fighting that continued until the end of the month, they lost 15,000 men. Ortigara rightly earned its reputation as the grave of the Alpini. A further 11,000 men were sacrificed by the neighbouring corps. The operation ended in bloody failure: the summit of Ortigara, which had initially remained in our hands, had to be evacuated because it was impossible to hold under the exceedingly violent artillery fire sweeping it.

Thus ended the Italian army's spring offensive. The losses had been immense and the gains extremely small. In the forty days between mid-May and the end of June, we had suffered 54,000 dead, 129,000 wounded and 27,000 prisoners, a total of 210,000 men. Fortunately, the thinned ranks were replenished by the nineteen-year-old boys of the 1898 class, who had just completed their three months of training.

During the same period Austrian losses were only a little over 100,000 men, of whom 25,000 had been taken prisoner. All in all, it had been a glorious slaughter.

When the accounts were drawn up, there arose the problem of deciding who could claim to have won the Tenth Battle of the Isonzo. If the losses and the small amount of ground evacuated were counted, there was no doubt that victory rightly belonged to the Austrians. Enemy losses, however, were unknown, and only restraint limited the freedom to attribute to them whatever figure one pleased. Another criterion of comparison consisted in counting the generals who had been torpedoed. By that measure we certainly set a record, for Garioni and Lo Curcio were only two among the many relieved of command.

General Cigliana, commander of XI Corps - the same man whom Cadorna had defended over the executions carried out the previous November in the Napoli Brigade - was also torpedoed for "culpable negligence". He was accused of failing to have sufficient communication trenches built to protect the movement of troops into the front line, thereby allegedly causing grave and unjustified losses. XIII Army Corps was completely decapitated: the corps commander and all three divisional commanders were relieved, including General Porta, who had led the terrible assault by the Salerno and Catanzaro Brigades.

> "No one knows what sort of generals His Excellency Cadorna wants," Attilio Frescura commented on this occasion.

To the troops who had been engaged, the contrast between the boasted successes and the "torpedoes" earned by their commanders must certainly have appeared striking.

The Supreme Command and the press nevertheless organised a well-orchestrated attempt to transform defeat into a clear, radiant and unequivocal victory. This was far from exceptional; indeed, it was the rule. The British offensive in the Arras area, praised as a great victory, had led to the occupation of no more ground than ours. Nivelle's offensive, which had cost approximately the same losses as the Battle of the Isonzo and during which the advance was comparable to those of the almost simultaneous British and Italian offensives, had immediately been proclaimed a great victory. Only later, quietly, was the Chemin des Dames offensive transformed into a defeat in order to dispose of Nivelle, although he had suffered only once a misfortune to which Joffre had enjoyed a subscription for two years. The definition of "victory" and "defeat" was therefore entrusted to the ability to stuff skulls, according to the phraseology of the time.

It is therefore not surprising to read in La Stampa on 28 May:

> That these weeks of our war are bringing Europe closer to peace is a certain and immense fact.

And Barzini, on 1 June:

> From Plava to the Vipacco, eight divisions have been defeated. On the Karst no fewer than nine. Three of them are almost completely annihilated. Sixteen or seventeen divisions have been disorganised and mangled by the battle.

This was perfectly true, except that the Italian divisions "disorganised and mangled" during the same period numbered thirty. Nor did it seem adequate evidence for the thesis of "victory" to cite the enthusiastic reports of Allied journalists, especially the British ones, while the French remained cooler. It was also added that:

> At Petrograd, news of the brilliant successes of our arms aroused enthusiasm. A large gathering made an exceedingly warm demonstration of sympathy towards Italy and the Italian Army.

With Russia in full revolution, this was the most spectacular result. The dose was increased on 6 June by the Stefani Agency, which circulated the official "truth", ridiculing the figure of 180,000 men - very close to the truth - which the Austrians claimed the Italians had lost so far in the Tenth Battle, and maintaining instead that, "according to verified data", it was the Austro-Hungarians who had suffered losses "infinitely greater" than the Italian losses.

As for the Supreme Command, a long summary communiqué on the spring cycle of operations presented the version closest to the mentality and convictions of the General Staff. It stated:

> 7,113 prisoners, including 163 officers, eighteen guns, a very large number of trench mortars and machine guns, and an immense quantity of matériel sealed the success of this first offensive stage [that of the Gorizia Zone].

The Third Army's action was painted in language better suited to describing a Napoleonic manoeuvre:

> The centre and the right, from Castagnevizza to the sea, resolutely overcame the enemy entrenchments facing our lines, flooding... into the area south of the road between Castagnevizza and Boscomalo, and turning the latter locality from the south-west...
>
> The enemy's attempts to halt the advance were desperate on that day [25 May] and the following

> one: exceedingly violent fire, mass counter-attacks without regard for losses, aeroplanes sent to bomb at low altitude; but our advance proceeded irresistibly and established itself.

And farther on:

> The positive results of this spring offensive of ours, highly significant, as stated, because of the tactical objectives attained, were no less important for the damage inflicted on the enemy. Besides 24,260 prisoners, including 634 officers, it is estimated that at least 100,000 men were put out of action...

In reality Austrian losses were considerably lower than this figure, while ours proved much higher. As for the extremely unfortunate operation at Ortigara, it was described in these terms:

> The enemy had not yet had time to recover from the formidable shock suffered on the Isonzo when our energy already compelled him to run for cover on the Asiago plateau...

The operation of stuffing skulls succeeded, at least in part, even with the better-qualified section of public opinion. Orlando himself, although as Minister of the Interior he possessed every means of being informed as fully as possible, almost fell for it. He later told the Commission of Inquiry into Caporetto:

> The May-June 1917 offensive aroused profound doubts in some people, including me, whose brain is in a state of continual critical activity. I had the feeling that matters had not gone well, that it was a failure.

Those who were not Ministers of the Interior or did not have relatives at the front believed what they were intended to believe. People whose loved ones were in the operational zone were less influenced, because funeral notifications had been too numerous on that occasion, and the people in mourning could be counted.

The same propaganda made no impression, or produced a negative effect, on the troops engaged in the operation, who had lived through and witnessed the immense tragedy with their own eyes.

At the beginning of the Tenth Battle, according to Baj-Macario, the morale of the Italian troops was barely mediocre. Compared with the past, getting the soldiers out of the trenches had become a more exhausting operation. Officers had to shout loudly, encourage the fearful, seize men trying to slip away, urge on the laggards and call back those who had strayed. It was only logical that for the survivors of a hundred assaults the next possessed the charm of a repeated surgical operation whose full seriousness and danger they had measured on previous occasions.

Once outside, however, the infantrymen of Italy still fought bravely. And what can be said, in these circumstances, of the moral and psychological effort demanded of the very young platoon commanders? Even among the many whose heroism reached the heights of sublime and conscious sacrifice, the spirit sometimes rebelled, only to fall back into a sadness imprisoned by an inescapable fate. They were all boys of twenty, like the Alpini second lieutenant Adolfo Ferrero, who at midnight on 18 June at Ortigara wrote to his parents:

> I feel life within me claiming its share of sunlight; I feel my hours are numbered, and I foresee a glorious but horrible death... In five hours this place will be hell...
>
> I am not afraid! I feel moved now, thinking of you and of all I am leaving, but before my soldiers I know how to appear strong, calm and smiling. They too, moreover, have the very highest morale.
>
> O parents, in a few years, when they are able to understand you, speak to my little brothers of me, who died at twenty for the Fatherland. Speak to them of me; strive to awaken their memory of me...
>
> How painful is the thought of being forgotten by them...

Ten hours later, Second Lieutenant Ferrero, a literature student at the University of Turin, fell on the battlefield.

Numerous examples of the troops' "cautious" attitude occurred during the battle. The death of Colonel Robino, commander of the 119th Infantry Regiment, was described as follows:

> After an enemy bombardment an attack had been launched, and our men had to spring out of the shelters to repel it. The colonel saw that the soldiers were hesitating while the enemy machine guns had opened an intense grazing fire. Fearing that his men would fall back, the colonel, heedless of the bullets, rushed among the soldiers to the edge of the trench, waved his carefully gloved hands, climbed onto the tangle of sandbags, stood upright and cried:
>
> "The Austrians must be driven back. Boys, follow me!"

They were his last words: as the soldiers followed him, a bullet struck him dead.

Lieutenant Vincenzo Lentini, who commanded a trench-mortar battery in the Volkovnjak sector near the unhealthy Point 126, was involved in another episode showing little offensive spirit among the troops. It occurred during the Austrian counter-offensive. After forty minutes of fire, the enemy artillery lengthened its range to protect the advance of its own men:

> I rushed, unarmed as I was, out of the tunnel, and since the infantrymen, also unarmed, did not move when urged by my voice, I picked up a stick within reach and began beating them, making them understand that they had to go out and oppose the enemy advance.
>
> I managed to get them out and send them in search of the weapons they had abandoned in the trench, but by then the enemy controlled the ground and I saw them surrounded and taken prisoner.

Later, questioned by his army-corps commander in the hospital to which he had been taken wounded, Lentini declared that the number of prisoners whom the enemy announced it had captured without a shot being fired - 800 - was probably exaggerated; but given the violence of the attack, the unarmed soldiers who had surrendered in order to escape death could not be accused of desertion.

Carlo Salsa, captured on the morning of 25 May, was taken to Sigmundsherberg, where he had occasion to discuss the soldiers' conduct with other prisoner officers:

> Groups form among the huts.
>
> "The soldiers are tired. They no longer advance."
>
> "I lost all mine along the road. They burrow in, hide, and want nothing more to do with it."
>
> "By hammering away with these offensives at fixed intervals, this is where we have arrived."
>
> "Once they allowed themselves to be killed cheerfully, whole regiments at a time. Now they no longer want to risk their skins, not even for anything worthwhile. They are finished."
>
> "I shot two soldiers in the legs to set an example. It was no use."
>
> "More than nineteen of mine ran away the other night when the bombardment began. They ought to be held by ferocious discipline, like the Austrians."
>
> "But the Austrians relieve their soldiers: they have fixed tours and fresh troops for attacks. We, on the other hand, are thrown into an offensive with a month of trench life in our bones and two years' service at the front. We are men; we have the endurance of men."

"But do the commands not learn all these things?"

"Every colonel is determined to report that his own regiment is the finest in the world; and certain things are always adjusted afterwards."

"Whoever dares state that the soldiers are tired ends up on trial; and then one manages to say what they want."

"No one has the courage to tell the truth!"

"The truth in war has been embalmed."

"Let us hope they do not move."

"I have heard that in October they will launch a major offensive."

This first and remarkably early reference to the Caporetto offensive may seem strange. Yet in those very days, for propaganda purposes, the Austrians themselves had allowed something of their future intentions to leak out. They had caused an enigmatic note to be published in the Spanish newspaper ABC, which favoured the Central Powers, stating that it was possible that "the present spring may be the last in which official communiqués mention the names of mountains and villages situated on the banks of the Isonzo".

General Cadorna had been impressed less by the losses suffered by the army during the recent battle than by the sudden collapse of several units, especially in the Third Army sector. In his view, two parties were responsible for the weakening of warlike enthusiasm: the Minister of the Interior and the subversive parties, the Socialist Party first and foremost.

During those weeks a military court was conducting what was known as the Pradamano trial. The inquiry had uncovered a kind of conspiracy within the army, with the connivance of several civilians. Forty-two people were implicated. Posters inciting desertion, antimilitarist songs and poems, proclamations and other incendiary material had been seized from them. One of these compositions read:

To the old frontiers - you all ran,
crying aloud - The foreigner must go.
But the true enemy - of your own interests,
with satanic laughter - rejoiced within his heart.

And another manifesto stated:

This war, O working peoples, is not "our war", yet you are its victims... By every means in your power hasten the end of the world slaughter; demand an immediate armistice... Down with the war! Long live peace! Immediate peace without annexations, and long live international socialism!

Every serviceman found in the war zone in possession of writings inciting desertion and rebellion was subjected to the severest measures. Avanti! was also prohibited, although soldiers on leave or pass could read it freely without fear of any punishment.

Cadorna therefore saw his repressive action frustrated by the Government's passive attitude, which seemed to say to him: this is your affair; it does not concern us. Meanwhile it permitted the existence of two Italys with very different degrees of tolerance: the "war zone" and the interior of the country.

The last drop that made his patience overflow was the conduct of the troops beneath Hermada during the Austrian counter-offensive. On 6 June he therefore wrote a first letter to the Prime Minister:

> ... From the information so far received from the command of the Third Army, it would appear that the greater part of those captured belonged to three infantry regiments composed predominantly of Sicilians. They are said to have fallen into enemy hands not through the unavoidable fortunes of combat, but to have defected instead...
>
> If the information corresponds to the truth, these defections could only be another fruit of the propaganda against the war being conducted in Sicily, which has reduced the island to a dangerous den of draft evaders and deserters, who according to reports from the Ministry of War number more than 20,000.
>
> But Sicily alone is not a source of poisonous propaganda against the war and military duty. Elsewhere too - in Tuscany, Emilia, Romagna and Lombardy itself - antipatriotic theories are being sown with malignant skill. Among replacement troops arriving from the country and soldiers returning from leave, grave symptoms of indiscipline are appearing which have required the most energetic measures of repression so that the evil may not spread. It has therefore been necessary to resort to immediate executions on a large scale and to dispense with the forms of criminal proceedings, because the evil must be cut off at its roots while there is still hope of acting in time.

The ferocity of the moment was general. In those very days in France, the preliminary investigation introduced into the military penal code by a law passed only the year before was suspended, and the right of appeal to Army headquarters was abolished by authority. The censor forbade the press both to comment upon the changes and to publish the text of the new articles.

In the same letter Cadorna added:

> If the symptoms now observed and suppressed were to persist, and worse still to spread, I shall be compelled to take extreme measures and resort to the decimation of units infected by the contagion...
>
> The indiscipline that threatens to corrupt the fabric of our army derives from and depends upon the tolerance with which the most perverse theories are allowed to spread unpunished throughout the country by internal enemies...
>
> What is happening in these days in certain units of our troops is of such threatening gravity that I should fail in the first of my duties if I did not state... what I consider to be the principal cause of the evil and the only possible remedy.

Two days later the Generalissimo returned to the attack:

> ... It is necessary that the work pursued within the country by the Socialists - the names of several of the most dangerous agitators are on everyone's lips - should be stopped without further delay by energetic and immediate measures at the very sources from which it emanates, so that propaganda which threatens, with manifest signs and openly avowed purposes, to destroy in the army and the country the most vital feelings of Fatherland, discipline and military honour may proceed no farther...

Cadorna continued by describing the internal situation as one of "extreme gravity", so that there was an "urgent necessity" to confront it by every means and without hesitation.

Several more days passed during which the Prime Minister carefully avoided replying. On 13 June Cadorna sent a third letter which, after repeating his previous warnings, maintained:

> ... While the absolute necessity of keeping the army's moral fabric firm obliges me to suppress every act of indiscipline by extreme means, I am convinced that often, rather than being consciously guilty, the soldiers recently condemned to death were deluded men, stirred up by subversive propaganda whose threads must be traced within the country, and that the true parties responsible are safe and unpunished. My conscience revolts at the thought that I should be compelled to continue

> external repression which does not touch the true culprits and leaves the root of the evil intact...
>
> I further point out to Your Excellency that external repression, as it multiplies until it reaches impressive proportions, loses its effectiveness as an example and at a certain moment might produce effects contrary to those intended. Meanwhile, if the system hitherto followed of extreme tolerance towards the true causes continues, the evil might assume such proportions that even the most extreme repressive measures could prove powerless against it...

Cadorna was not bloodthirsty, and the repressive measures against the agitators could, according to what he himself wrote later, have been limited to "arresting a few hundred ringleaders and propagandists, freeing the beautiful country of them by transporting them to the coasts of Eritrea or Somalia, and suppressing the newspapers and little papers, poisoners of the public spirit, which were multiplying and which the Government freely allowed to multiply in every corner of Italy". It was not, in his view, through a reign of terror - which he regarded as counterproductive - that public spirit could be raised, but by instilling in the country a "sense of the Government's energy", as Clemenceau later did in France.

Nor did he wish to play the Minister of the Interior's executioner. While in Rome at the beginning of June, he was interviewed by Malagodi and declared:

> ... The Government tolerates the growth of certain poisonous plants here; then, when something happens, it sends them down to me so that I may have them shot. It is not a pleasant business when it can be avoided by greater vigilance and energy in the interior.

Whether or not these retrospective ideas of the Generalissimo were the cure for the situation, the Government turned a deaf ear even to his third communication. Boselli merely sent Orlando a "very resentful personal copy", and Orlando, with a lawyer's skill, began contesting Cadorna's observations point by point. It nevertheless seemed to the Minister of the Interior that it would not do simply to pretend that nothing was happening and that "it would be useful and perhaps indispensable to discuss that problem". He therefore proposed dealing with it at a special meeting "which would allow, through oral discussion, a thorough examination of the whole complex and extensive matter". The meeting was indeed organised - four months later.

In Italy, however, little weight continued to be attached to these melancholy matters, and business proceeded at full sail. So much the worse for the two hundred thousand families visited by misfortune during the previous month. People had lost count of the Battles of the Isonzo along the way. Was this the Tenth Battle? And which had been the Fifth, or the Eighth, or the Third?

Officially, austerity reigned. On 12 June the State shoes went on sale - three types, for men, women and country wear - and they were far from cheap. Yet the following was cited as an extreme example, although was it truly extreme? A man had offered the Fatherland a gold chain worth four hundred lire, bought eight years earlier from a jeweller. Immediately after this patriotic gesture, the benefactor hurried to the same jeweller to buy a pearl necklace worth four hundred thousand lire to compensate his wife, who had been deprived of the previous and less expensive ornament. For him, and for many others like him, it was evidently desirable that the hundredth Battle of the Isonzo and beyond should be reached.

Meanwhile, as the echoes of the inquiry into the Cortese affair died away, well-to-do ladies prepared for their seaside holidays, which that year were preferred so long as they did not venture offshore, where the submarines were raging. As a precaution, the tenor Tito Schipa unilaterally cancelled the engagements he had signed with the Colon Theatre in Buenos Aires. Fashion houses bearing flirtatious French names - La Maison Marcelle, Au dernier cri and so forth - offered the latest Parisian novelties in seaside elegance.

On 20 June the Chamber reopened after a recess of many months, but immediately closed again because Parliament had decided to meet in secret committee. What was said there was therefore forbidden to the public's ears, although the newspapers managed to let something leak out by reporting, not always faithfully, the quantities of applause received at the close of speeches by deputies whom they favoured. Otherwise the sittings were fairly useless. The more precise questions were evaded by members of the Government.

A whole day was wasted listening to the delirious invectives of Deputy De Felice, who attacked, among others, a senior official of the Ministry of Agriculture. According to the accusation, the official had cynically replied that he remained at the disposal of "His Excellency Conrad" when the Supreme Command invited him to visit the war zone for an inspection. Orlando had to intervene personally to explain to the surprised but incredulous Chamber that the telegram sent by the official - "I am at the disposal of H.E. Conrand" - had been grossly misunderstood by De Felice.

Military tactics were also discussed. Deputy General Marazzi, formerly a divisional commander under Capello and an ardent supporter of his, urged that the series of offensives should be ended and a defensive attitude adopted while awaiting clarification of the situation in Russia and the arrival of the aid promised by America. The significance of these not unreasonable words, however, had been devalued the previous day by an imprudent statement from the Minister of the Navy. Pressed by the Socialist Modigliani as to whether he believed the large-scale transport of troops from the United States to Europe was possible, Admiral Triangi, with the authority deriving from his office and presumed technical competence, had replied:

- I consider it absolutely difficult.

If, therefore, nothing was to be expected from America, it was better to hurry and win before Russia collapsed rather than wait for it to disintegrate completely. Just as Russia's strength had been overestimated, America's was now underestimated - and to what an extent.

Three days of secret sittings were also held in the Senate. The substance of the discussions was that Italy's interests would have been better protected by remaining neutral: a disappointing discovery.

When the Chamber reopened its doors to continue in public session, the speeches became vaguer. The Socialist deputy Filippo Turati called for a peace that was honourable, advantageous, lasting, victorious, but "prompt": requirements that were rather contradictory. Deputy Treves, who regarded Britain as the black soul of the coalition, raised the dose a few days later by coining the slogan for which, unfortunately for him, he remained famous: "Next winter, no longer in the trenches." He believed he had expressed a wish and later discovered that he had launched a watchword.

Italy's survival, however, depended entirely upon the will of the Allies. Coal, iron, oil, wheat, meat - everything needed not only to fight but also to live - reached our ports with their consent. It was too late for second thoughts; there was no choice between war and the starvation of an entire people.

Onward, then, to the next battle!

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ELEVENTH BATTLE

Slow to decide, the Entente Powers continued to toy with the idea of sending Franco-British troops to Italy. This prolonged indecision over questions of vital importance was not so much a consequence of the parliamentary system prevailing among them as of the fact that it was not strong enough. Whereas in the Central Empires the will of the military regularly overwhelmed that of the trembling civilian Cabinets, in the Entente countries the forces were, so to speak, balanced. An apparent division of functions produced an effective diarchy, through which the two powers succeeded in neutralising each other in a continual tug-of-war.

The advisability of concentrating a decisive effort against Austria-Hungary was reconsidered by Cadorna. On 30 May he wrote to Capel Cure, the British commercial attache in Rome, that the time seemed to have come to hasten the cooperation of British and Italian forces along the Isonzo:

> Events now vindicate the forecasts made by the Honourable Lloyd George and myself. While on the Western Front the latest offensive demonstrates the difficulty, not to say the impossibility, of achieving a breakthrough capable of attaining the objectives laid down, on the Julian Front it is becoming increasingly evident that reaching points of vital sensitivity to the Austro-Hungarian monarchy is only a question of means.

That there was at that moment not the slightest probability of deciding the war on the Western Front with the available forces became indisputable within a few days, when the British simultaneously exploded one million pounds of ammonium nitrate - whose explosive effect was equivalent to that of a small atomic bomb - distributed among twenty mines. The chambers beneath the German trenches had been excavated in painful work lasting twenty-four months, yet the advance was barely two kilometres over a width of five, and the ratio of losses was disappointing: 22,000 British against 27,000 Germans. This was despite the tactical surprise produced by so formidable an explosion, which was heard throughout France and made even London tremble.

This attack, which passed into history under the grandiloquent name of the Battle of Messines, was nevertheless only the prologue to what Douglas Haig intended to launch a month later in Flanders, supported in this with some hesitation by General Robertson. The latter felt intense repugnance when he realised that Lloyd George, after the unfortunate outcome of the Nivelle experiment, was once again being tempted by the Italian front. On 13 June he wrote to Haig:

> There is trouble... Lloyd George's idea is to decide the war in Italy, and today the transport authorities have been asked for figures concerning the rapid transfer of twelve divisions and 300 heavy guns to Italy! They will never leave while I remain Chief of the Imperial General Staff...

British aspirations, however, also moved in other and divergent directions. At the end of April 1917, the British Cabinet - therefore the civilian power - had informed Baron Sonnino that any Italian claim upon Turkey after victory must immediately be supported by sending a substantial contingent of troops. Sonnino, eager for Italy to assert its imperial power through a protectorate in Cilicia, was disturbed by the British demand and turned to the Chief of the General Staff, asking whether he could help him in some way.

To Cadorna it seemed that he had been given a riddle. Lloyd George personally favoured strengthening the Italian front against the advice of his military experts. Nevertheless, the British Cabinet over which

he presided considered it logical for Italy to weaken its principal front in order to send to Palestine a contingent "decidedly larger than 6,000 men", which would have mobilised ten times as many for maintenance and supply.

The opportunity to discuss these oddities was provided by a meeting Cadorna held at Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne on 24 and 25 June with General Foch, about whose contents the Austrians were informed "from a good source". Faced with Cadorna's protests and explanations, Foch became convinced of the scale of our military effort and, Cadorna replied to Sonnino, "agreed with me in considering that all available forces and means must be concentrated and exploited in the principal theatre of operations". On that occasion Cadorna also touched upon the question of sending further Allied artillery to Italy, together with its ammunition, and found Foch enthusiastically in agreement. This was strange only up to a point, since Foch then had no operational responsibility - he was a kind of military adviser to the French Government, despite bearing the resounding title of Chief of the General Staff - and enjoyed a clarity of judgement denied to those who commanded armies.

But neither Cadorna nor Foch possessed the power to neutralise or reverse the decision taken in London a few days earlier. Between 19 and 21 June the final duel had taken place between the British Westerners and Easterners, and the former had won by a wide margin. Despite bitter experience, the decision of the war in the summer of 1917 would once again be sought on the Western Front, even without French participation. The irrevocable blessing upon Douglas Haig was telegraphed by the War Cabinet on the following 25 July, in warm words and through clenched teeth, when for three days 3,100 British guns around Ypres had already been conducting the greatest artillery bombardment in the history of land warfare. With his stubborn obstinacy, Douglas Haig had achieved complete success: he had not only bent his British enemies, but compelled them to do his will with smiles upon their lips.

Meanwhile, another inter-Allied conference was being organised, to be held in Paris from 24 to 26 July. The list of subjects on the agenda was almost endless, but one stood above all the rest in importance, although no one yet dared discuss it publicly: what strategy should be adopted if Russia withdrew from the scene?

The Paris conference, attended by no fewer than forty-three delegates, immediately appeared swollen and inconclusive. General Smuts confided to Wilson that he had never witnessed a more futile display of incompetence. Lloyd George, victim of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, took revenge by engaging in general obstruction and branding the assembly a "Duma" [12]. He spoke freely against his own military men, accusing them of possessing less imagination than could be found in his thumb.

Foch, Cadorna and Robertson, for their part, met for the first time on 24 July and immediately quarrelled over the British request to withdraw a division from Salonika and transport it to Palestine. As for sending British troops to the Italian front, discussing it at the very moment the great British offensive was beginning was a waste of time. More thoughtful analysis was required for the future, should Russia throw in the towel.

Foch's opinion, shared by Cadorna, was that in such an event the strictest defensive posture would have to be adopted everywhere. Yet since Russia had not yet collapsed - although her recent offensive was ending disastrously - was it worth supporting her asthmatic effort by relieving Austro-German pressure on the Eastern Front?

The discussion, left inconclusive on the 24th, resumed on the morning of the 26th with the participation of Petain and General Pershing, commander of the American army in the Western theatre and newly arrived in Europe. Pershing summarises in a few words the disagreeable and depressed atmosphere of the meeting:

> At the meeting of 26 July with the military chiefs - the first which I attended - little was concluded that could give grounds for hope... Robertson stated that British losses had been heavy during the year and that the reserve of manpower had been greatly reduced. Petain recalled the grave French losses and said that the French could increase their forces only to a slight degree. Cadorna showed that the Italian army was in approximately the same condition.

In short, everyone pleaded poverty before the new and wealthy ally - an attitude the Europeans learned on that occasion and never afterwards forgot.

The delegates' conjectures about the consequences of a possible Russian defection were frozen into the minutes of the meeting and could not have been darker. The document stated that, in the event of a Russian collapse hypothetically forecast for 1 October, German forces in the West would increase at the rate of fifteen divisions a month, reaching numerical equality with the Allies on 1 January 1918 and a superiority estimated at forty to fifty divisions on 1 June. By that date German forces would reach a maximum of 273 divisions [13], after which the American contribution would begin to make itself felt in favour of the Entente. As for Italy, it was thought that if the Austro-German effort were directed against us, enemy divisions would arrive at the rate of ten a month, so that by mid-May, the season favourable for resuming offensive operations, the enemy concentration could be complete.

These hypotheses were sensible, although strongly tinged with pessimism. The following sentence, however, was rather cryptic:

> By this date [15 May 1918] the Italian army might - if it increases the number of its divisions in proportion to its manufacture of artillery, as its Commander-in-Chief would appear to intend - oppose between eighty and ninety divisions to the enemy forces. In these conditions Italy might be capable of parrying the offensive by its own means, or with reinforcement from the Allied Armies whose scale does not appear likely to exceed their capabilities.

This sequence of conditional expressions seems truly strange, considering that Cadorna was present, and the unhappy suspicion arises that he allowed one word too many to escape him. Raising the army to ninety divisions was indeed a secret ambition of his. But when the Allies learned of it, they drew the obvious conclusion: with so powerful an army, Italy needed no help.

Among the various hypotheses, the intermediate and true one was not considered: Russia would indeed leave the scene, but in such chaos and confusion along her immense frontier that the German Empires would be unable to strip the front completely. After the armistice they were in fact compelled to leave there half the forces they had maintained while full fighting continued.

But was the Russian game to be regarded as lost? Might Russia's survival not also depend upon the relief provided by the Allies?

To avoid losing this chance, the British had to unleash and sustain the offensive in Flanders, while Italy had a moral obligation to launch one - indeed two - great offensives against Austria before the winter.

Two offensives in a single season seemed too many even to Cadorna. It was true that the Allies could place the following table before him:

Losses in dead, wounded and missing [1] up to the end of July 1917

Year	French	British on the Western Front [2]	Italians
1914	860,000	96,000	-
1915	1,550,000	296,000	270,000
1916	954,000	643,000	500,000

1917	487,000	423,000	250,000
Total	**3,851,000**	**1,458,000**	**1,020,000**

Even allowing for the fact that five per cent of French losses had been borne by colonial troops, and that the populations of Italy, France and Great Britain stood in the ratio 36:39:42, it was indisputable that, taking the losses suffered by metropolitan France as 100, the British losses were proportionately 37 and the Italian 31. Yet precisely because exhausted France was withdrawing from active combat and Great Britain was prepared to burn herself out in Flanders, Cadorna thought it imprudent to assume the harsh commitment of renewing at short notice an offensive which experience suggested would be extremely bloody. He therefore returned to the burning alternative: why not attempt the great blow against Austria-Hungary?

Foch was almost yielding; but as always Robertson remained irreducible. No troops for Italy, everything for the battle in northern France. In Lloyd George's words:

> He waved the Chantilly agreement before their eyes and refused to allow them to depart from their undertaking, as binding as Shylock's... To every appeal from Cadorna, to Petain's calm arguments, he replied like the Merchant of Venice: "I have your bond..." The man cared for nothing but the Flanders offensive. He was not there to confer or reflect. He was there to say: I have your bond. He said it... and obtained what he wanted.

Thereafter the official communiqué was issued, informing the world of the results of the Conference: "THE ALLIED POWERS, MORE CLOSELY UNITED THAN EVER..."

The attack by British infantry began on 31 July and continued for four months amid unspeakable difficulties and suffering, at a cost of 360,000 men. No one wished to admit that the offensive might escape the control of intentions and hopes, although many suspected it. Thus the possibility of an Anglo-Italian action on the Isonzo front continued to be discussed even in August. On the 7th and 8th another plenary meeting was held in London, where Cadorna was represented by General Albricci, who had to repeat the estimate of the aid required for a decisive operation on our front: ten divisions and 400 heavy guns.

On that occasion Italy was offered a reasoned excuse for postponing the next offensive sine die, when the British minister Thomas asked the Italian representative whether it would not be advisable to delay it until the Allies could contribute at least the celebrated 400 heavy guns, which had become a kind of Arabian phoenix. Sonnino, instinctively opposed to a new Karst offensive, sensed that the proposal had Lloyd George's support and therefore inclined towards accepting it. In the Prime Minister's oblique intentions, this promise of aid would bind his generals to put an end to the Flanders offensive if they also wished to grant Italy the pleasure of measuring herself against the enemy in the remaining part of the season.

Cadorna, although unwilling to guarantee the Allies two offensives, was nevertheless determined to conduct at least one, with or without their aid. General Albricci, who knew his chief's opinion, telegraphed to warn him against the "insidious proposal" and requested instructions, which were immediately supplied.

Had Cadorna waited a few hours, however, he would not have needed to justify his eagerness to fight and would not have assumed the responsibility later thrown back at him. The Franco-British staffs, immediately informed of Thomas's initiative, declared that no gun could be removed from the Western Front for an indefinite period. A few days later, to avoid misunderstanding, General Robertson took care to remove every illusion Cadorna might still have possessed:

To His Excellency General Cadorna
17 August 1917

...

> With regard to the question of supplying Your Excellency with further heavy artillery, guns from the existing stocks can be withdrawn only from the British Armies in France and, as I have already said, there is at present no possibility of saying how many batteries might become available, or even whether they can in fact be sent. As for the possibility of supplying Your Excellency with guns from new stocks, I am making inquiries at the British Ministry of Munitions and shall have the information when we next meet; but Your Excellency knows that this too depends upon the requirements of the British Armies in France, which in turn depend upon the development of the operations now in progress...

No declaration could have been more tortuous than this series of conditions. Robertson saw in Cadorna an importunate pawn in the British Prime Minister's struggle against his Chief of the Imperial General Staff, a war conducted with memoranda, reports and despatches between each pair of which twenty or thirty thousand young British men were erased from the rolls of the armies in France. Robertson and Haig were indeed bound to interrupt operations if it became visibly impossible to reach the desired objectives - the Belgian coast north-east of Flanders - and by mid-August it was clear that the campaign had thoroughly failed. But since their hidden aspiration was still to wear down and wear down and wear down Germans, firmly believing in this that the Lord God was on their side and would absolve them from continual deception, they changed their objectives from week to week, asked for more time and promised that "the next few days would be decisive". There were therefore no guns for Italy because there could be none.

Foch was the first to emerge from the hypocrisy, concluding that it was now too late to speak of aid to Italy during 1917 and that the divisions and guns should be postponed until May 1918. But in May 1918 would not the same difficulties be raised again? Lloyd George, temporarily defeated and therefore exceptionally suspicious, believed this entirely possible.

When Lord Derby, the British Secretary of State for War, prepared in September to visit the French and Italian fronts, the Prime Minister did not hesitate to suggest to our ambassador that his minister should be welcomed festively and skilfully courted. At least this was how the military attache, General Mola, expressed himself in a despatch to Cadorna. Mola, however, was not a person deserving complete confidence, if one follows Colonel Gatti's judgement: "He showed himself and talked too much, but only on certain occasions, when some minister came; and then it was too late to learn anything in time..."

In the same despatch, as a true flatterer, Mola did not hesitate to reveal confidentially to his chief, as proof "of the high esteem of competent circles for Our Supreme Command":"

> that recently, in several quarters - and no later than the day before yesterday by an officer formerly military attache in Egypt and now attached to the Operations Section of the War Office - the circumstance that His Excellency General Cadorna is the only commander in the field to have remained in office since before the war has been noted as highly important because of its repercussions upon public opinion; and it has been observed that his successes place him in the very first rank to assume the general direction of the war, in the event of the hoped-for closer cooperation among the Allied armies in every theatre.

The words of a jinx could not have been more effective. Within two months Cadorna would swell the number of torpedoed commanders of every language and race. In the meantime, however, he would

have the opportunity to complete his greatest undertaking, the Battle of the Bainsizza, and to suffer the most disastrous of defeats: Caporetto.

While staff officers bent over large-scale maps and planned the new midsummer offensives, the political and psychological situation at the front and in the interior was turning decidedly worse. The Russian Revolution played an important part in this, for it was no longer so certain that it had occurred for the better fortune of the democracies, or that it represented, as a psychiatrist and medical general had written a few months earlier, "the splendid springtime of a great people asserting itself in the spring of the year of victory".

Lieutenant Muccini, who was with the 46th Division beneath the Mrzli ridge, recalls the heated discussions that broke out in the regimental mess:

> Everyone talks about the Russian Revolution, grows heated and passionate, and says every kind of nonsense, especially Frapolli, who has now become the official lecturer and is not very enthusiastic, seeing darkness in the future.
>
> "Those fools!" he shouts. "All they ever did was take beatings. Big, hulking idiots. First the Japanese, then the Austrians, then the Germans. Now they are giving up, and the divisions that have hitherto been on their front will pour down upon us. Then we shall laugh!"
>
> "But this morning," Caronia reproaches him, "you spoke to my soldiers for an hour to demonstrate what tremendous good fortune the Russian Revolution is for us!"
>
> "What has that to do with it? It is different for the infantryman; and besides, those are orders from above. The truth is..."

To understand something of the Russian situation, an Italian mission had been sent to Petrograd in an entirely private capacity during June. Its members were the reformist Socialists Raimondo, Cappa and Lercia, together with Deputy Labriola. Their task was not only to study the situation at close quarters, but also to conduct whatever amount of pro-Entente propaganda would not prove counterproductive. The four missionaries established relations with the Russian Socialist Revolutionaries - who despite their name represented the moderate wing of the Socialist movement - and made several speeches, always punctuated by "warm applause", in which they strove to impress upon the Russians that, for their own good, they must not consider the game closed. "Italy," Raimondo said, "is fighting not only for herself, but also for the freedom of Europe." "And I express the hope," Deputy Cappa followed, "that at the end of the war Russia too may be able to say that she worked not only for herself but also for Europe."

Unfortunately for them, Angelica Balabanoff was already there. The Egeria of the Italian Socialist Party, who had arrived in Russia with Lenin's party, presented herself as the authorised ambassador of Italian Socialism and spoke every possible evil of the deputies sent from Rome. "They," she maintained and explained to inadequately informed "comrades", "were false Socialists, traitors to the working class and enslaved, like all reformists, to warmongering capital." Spoken at an assembly of revolutionary sailors at Kronstadt, this assertion had a certain resonance, and its echo reached Rome. Avanti! declared solidarity with Balabanoff, while Filippo Turati, more circumspect, stressed that since the beginning of the war Balabanoff had no longer belonged to the leadership of the Italian Socialist Party and could not therefore speak in its name. He then expressed himself in a most unchivalrous manner about the revolutionary's personal qualities:

> Balabanoff is certainly not a woman of genius; nevertheless I cannot believe that she made the statements attributed to her... unless she has become completely idiotic...

A controversy over Turati's exact words was therefore inevitable. He denied using that coarse vocabulary, while confirming the substance of his statements.

These inter-Socialist quarrels delighted Orlando, who saw in them effective assistance to his delaying policy of carrying on until the longed-for peace "burst", after which "those who live will see". At this point, therefore, he considered it supreme cunning to favour the entry into Italy of several Russian revolutionaries who were touring Europe. Despite the war, the summer of 1917 was a boom period for political tourism. They were dragged around like monsters in a fairground booth to confirm in words and testimony that Russians of every party supported the war, that Italian Socialists must therefore imitate their example, and so forth. It was the gentle tactic opposed to the executions then in vogue at the front.

The journey vindicated Cadorna. The representatives of "mild Marxism", arriving from London and Paris where they had received rather reserved and distrustful welcomes, reached Turin on 5 August. From the balcony of the Casa del Popolo they delivered a confused harangue, at the end of which a sea of forty thousand people - the open-air meeting had been forbidden, but the police, faithful to the suggestions of the Minister of the Interior, closed one eye - shouted their enthusiasm for the Russian Revolution and for Lenin.

The most influential of the revolutionaries, Goldenberg, was annoyed and embarrassed, since the Bolsheviks were not precisely his passion. Engineer Romita therefore expended some Marxist dialectic in explaining to him that the shout meant exactly the opposite of what it sounded like. From Turin, Goldenberg and his colleague Smirnov reached Rome, where instead cries of "Down with Lenin!" rang out, according to the Socialists from a small group of interventionist shirkers. On the 11th the delegation was in Milan, received with the most gentlemanly hospitality by the Socialist administration of lawyer Caldara.

With the foreign and Italian dignitaries assembled in the council chamber of Palazzo Marino, Caldara entrusted the welcome to Deputy Turati, who gave free rein to his French eloquence. Turati, an extremist among conservatives and a conservative among extremists, expressed himself as follows:

> You have been called the Argonauts of Peace. But not - I know it, you have declared it and it was not even necessary - the Argonauts of a peace of cowardice and betrayal... We all know that it is not through a peace born of exhaustion and renunciation, through a precipitate peace entirely to the advantage of the strongest militarism, that Socialist democracy would guarantee a lasting peace to the proletarians of the earth...

Goldenberg thanked him and, as though nothing had happened, said that Russia truly needed peace in order to consolidate her recent democracy, with the sole reservation that it must not be the "vain" separate peace. The discussion deserved to continue, but at that moment it was announced that refreshments were ready and everyone rushed to the "rich" champagne buffet. After the pastries, however, the conversation resumed.

That everyone needed peace was either too obvious or very obscure. A group of interventionists therefore wished to question the Menshevik more closely in order to understand him better. Did Goldenberg, in conclusion, want war or peace? Peace, of course! But what kind of peace - a separate peace with Germany? Absolutely not, not a vain peace. That was already better. Then did he perhaps think it was time for diplomacy to move and replace the generals? Never! No diplomacy! Then what? It was simple: a general peace imposed by the peoples upon the Governments. The interventionists were disappointed: these Mensheviks really were idiots. What an idea Orlando had had, parading them around amid hosannas and aperitifs.

Meanwhile the Mensheviks left for Turin. As the train rocked them, Giolitti, elected president of the Provincial Council of Cuneo, delivered a speech in which he said things the defenders of the people might perfectly well have said had they been less occupied in admiring distant revolutions.

It was logical, Giolitti said, that peoples struck by so immense a catastrophe should set as their supreme goal the prevention of its recurrence, creating a state of affairs that would ensure this was the last war. The task of rulers after the war would be hard, for the veterans returning from the front, after heroically enduring such immense suffering, would not accept a simple return to yesterday's world. Only by allowing themselves to be guided by a lofty sense of justice and human solidarity could rulers channel this inevitable transformation so that it took place without upheavals.

These words ought to have aroused reflection and concern, but since the slogan of the hour was "the war now, everything else afterwards", most people saw in them an obscure manoeuvre by Giolitti, plotting to return to power with the sinister assistance of the Socialist neutralists.

This explanation did not apply, however, to the Pope, whose famous and widely heralded note to the Powers was published in those days, defining the heroic conflict, the Fourth War of Independence, as a "useless slaughter". But of course the Pope had always been pro-Austrian and had always aspired to recover Rome and the Papal State. Those without faith enjoyed the ineffable pleasure of blaspheming with the consent of the authorities; believers could demonstrate that they were Catholic, yes, but like every good Italian were "priest-eaters".

An absolute prohibition was imposed upon bringing the Pope's note to the attention of the troops. It was an impossible prohibition, because the continual return from leave of soldiers with pockets full of newspapers that were not forbidden immediately made the text of the papal note known to everyone. Yet the expected shock did not occur. Was that all, then, in the infamous papal note? Even the stones already knew that the war was a "useless slaughter".

The Menshevik delegates were consequently somewhat surprised when, passing through Novara, they heard together with the customary "Long live Lenin!" also "Long live Giolitti!" and "Long live the Pope!" These were three ingredients which did not combine well, and it was unclear whether the cheers were to be added, multiplied or subtracted.

Back in Turin on 13 August, Goldenberg and Smirnov were again acclaimed together with Lenin, to their great annoyance. Goldenberg addressed the crowd in French, and the interpreter produced so free a translation of his words that the crowd understood only one thing: Russia wanted peace, immediately and at any cost. The agreeable ceremony ended with cries of: long live the Russian proletarian revolution, long live the Italian revolution!

> "It was like the orgy of the harem, which is more terrible than the orgy of the brothel." This obscure and piquant definition of the Soviet mission to Italy was given by Vittorio Emanuele Orlando before the Commission of Inquiry into Caporetto.

But, continued the future Prime Minister after that singular comparison, one had to place oneself in the Government's position:

> That was the moment when the Russian Revolution had been greeted by all the peoples of the Entente as a blessing for the war, because it had deprived the Tsar of the possibility of the famous betrayal. This was believed; there was a feeling that these popular masses were assuming rather different directions...

After this confession of limited political instinct, Orlando nevertheless added stubbornly:

> If I were to find myself in the same circumstances again, I should probably have to do the same.

It is therefore no surprise that deaths occurred - indeed fifty deaths, together with two hundred wounded. Because of a temporary shortage of bread, Turin rose in revolt on 22 August and for several days its streets became the scene of bitter fighting. While one Italian army advanced on the Bainsizza, another army - certainly much smaller - advanced along Corso Vercelli and Via Carmagnola.

Apart from some hesitation by a few territorial troops, there were no examples of fraternisation between proletarian insurgents and equally proletarian soldiers. When everything ended on 26 August, more than one thousand people were reported to the judicial authorities. Several hundred others, against whom evidence was lacking, were sent to the front so that the Supreme Command, more solito, might grant them the grace of redeeming themselves by dying for the Fatherland.

The Turin revolt had a profound echo in the Council of Ministers. General Giardino declared that so long as he was Minister of War he would tolerate no revolutions behind the army. Two measures must therefore be taken: bread must not be allowed to run short, and the weapons held by the civilian population must be confiscated. The assembly applauded Giardino's words and generously approved the provision of bread, but Orlando refused to impose the disarmament of the population. It was not that he rejected the principle; rather, he disliked offending the feelings of potential rebels, faithful to the Roman-law principle that intentions are not put on trial. It was therefore decided, in agreement with the Ministry of Arms and Munitions, to proceed with the "purchase" of the weapons in circulation.

What were the causes of the bloody Turin revolt? Several days after the events, the Government issued a meagre communiqué making generic reference to "disturbances" caused by the "temporary" lack of bread resulting from errors in distribution. Almost immediately, however, the Socialist Party spread the claim that this was merely the apparent cause and that the true one was war-weariness, against which the workers of Turin had rebelled.

Government circles seized upon the argument in order to accuse Socialists, Giolittians and Catholics of seeking to sabotage the war by exploiting the brute force of masses who fought in the factories for twenty lire a day rather than for fifty centesimi in the trench. Cartoons showing Giolitti embracing "German gold", received as the reward for "perfidious deception", appeared in humorous newspapers, together with reproductions of grotesque telegrams in which Giolitti acknowledged receipt from the Kaiser of the price of betrayal and requested further gold in exchange for additional wicked enterprises.

These accusations caused many Socialist parliamentarians to adhere to the Government's original thesis, namely that the revolt was due purely and simply to hunger. Deputy Casalini, a doctor as well as a Socialist, explained to the Chamber with learned arguments that hungry people were capable of anything.

For years these positions were preserved. Fascism, insofar as it spoke of Turin at all - the subject remained almost taboo - accused the "Reds" of beginning the anti-national work which, continued after the war, would provoke the reaction of the "Blackshirts"; its opponents denied any subversive purpose. After further decades, however, representatives of the extreme Left claimed for themselves the merit of having opened in Turin the struggle against capitalism and against Fascism ante litteram, a kind of prehistory of the war of liberation. Moderate opinion, after a scrupulous examination of papers and documents, reached the conclusion that the Turin insurrection could safely be blamed upon the lack of bread. In conclusion, fifty years later it was still unknown what causes should be assigned to the Turin insurrection.

The atmosphere was certainly becoming overheated, and the germs of a darker future were being cultivated during the summer of 1917. Even a ridiculous episode involving the Socialist deputy Maffi was an indication. As he sat quietly reading the newspaper on a tram, the deputy was attacked by a man

who, armed with scissors, cut off a lock of his beard. Immediately pursued by Maffi and other passengers, the illicit barber was captured and handed over to justice, which tried him summarily two days later, on 13 July 1917, sentencing him to four months' imprisonment and ordering the return to Maffi of the stolen hairs. The attacker defended himself by justifying his act as a protest against the Socialists' sabotage of the war. Within a few years figures responsible for much greater violence would receive much lighter sentences.

Another example of confusion was provided by the result of a competition announced by the Milan Liberal Association for a study of the economic measures to be adopted at the end of the war. In June 1917 the winner was declared to be an anonymous manuscript whose author was later revealed as Signor Rinaldo Rigola, a Socialist and, moreover, General Secretary of the Italian Confederation of Labour.

But nothing equalled the astonishment caused by Henry Ford's arrival in Europe. The American millionaire held highly radical ideas: war was a filthy capitalist enterprise, and he was prepared to give all his wealth to shorten the conflict by a single day. He therefore established himself in Switzerland in order to form relationships capable of facilitating his humanitarian task. When he discovered that no one listened to him - neither Lenin, the Kaiser nor Lloyd George - he returned in disgust to the United States, which had itself been swept away by the warmongering wave.

In the competition to win the sympathy of a population naturally exhausted and desiring nothing but peace, the Catholics refused to be outdone by the Socialists. On 30 July 1917 Count Dalla Torre, a representative of the papal nobility then mobilised with the rank of major, went so far as to convene in Udine a meeting of priests and laymen of the diocese. Its purpose was to study the attitude to adopt towards the prolongation of the war and to deplore the excessively interventionist direction of the Catholic Corriere del Friuli. What means could be employed to remove responsibility for the war from the Catholic movement?

A first consequence was the appearance in the same Corriere del Friuli of a signed leading article by "Max". On 21 August, commenting on the Pope's note of 1 August under the significant title The Word to the Trench, it stated among other things:

> Do you know whence the most solemnly decisive of all replies to the pontifical note will come? Not from the heads of state to whom it is addressed; not from the responsible ministries by which it is discussed; not from the press, by which it is criticised according to individual appetites; not from the peoples of the whole world, who have nevertheless been so deeply moved by it. It will come from the trenches. Yes, the word now belongs to them, to the trenches. Benedict XV... has felt the pulse of the people in the trench, diagnosed their temperature, judged their organic constitution and power of resistance - and then he spoke.
>
> Now their answer is awaited.
>
> What will it be?
>
> This is the most colossal question mark attached to the final word of the pontifical document. Let the various Mussolinis of Italy and abroad remember it well: fighting the war beneath the hood of the chimney, they have failed to realise that the Pope's note must possess a very different interest for those who fight the war at the front.
>
> When they have taken possession of it, when they have assimilated it and been warmed and strengthened by it, then, O detractors on both sides of the Alps, their answer will come, formidable and crushing...

On the very morning of publication the newspaper was seized, and "Max", alias Don Guglielmo Gasparutti, was sent with his editor before the military court at Codroipo on a charge of inciting servicemen to disobedience and desertion. As always, the rule in the war zone was very different from that in force in the interior. The same ideas proclaimed by Goldenberg and Smirnov, as invited and applauded guests from the balconies of Italy's greatest cities, brought misfortune to a country priest who had taken up his pen after an abundant drinking session in a Udine tavern.

Several days later L'Osservatore Romano emerged to deplore "the erroneous interpretations which several newspapers - including Catholic ones - had placed upon the Pope's note", throwing the Corriere del Friuli overboard; the Roman Curia suppressed the newspaper. On 8 October 1917, however, the Codroipo military court acquitted the defendants, recognising that, given the existence of iron censorship over the press, a journalist could not be expected to censor himself in advance. This did not prevent Don Gasparutti, confined to Florence, from dying of sorrow and bitterness far from the Friuli he deeply loved.

July and the first half of August passed in almost absolute quiet on the Italian front. During that period the prisoners we captured did not number five hundred, and human losses too remained at a tolerable level: fifteen or sixteen thousand men, a dose of ordinary administration. Naturally, quiet was not distributed equally. The positions near San Marco - Casa Diruta, Dosso del Palo and the houses at Point 100 - remained an unhealthy residence for men with weak nerves. Nevertheless, relief and rest could be granted to the most battered brigades, and they could be replenished with indispensable replacements: the 1898 class and the less well-protected shirkers.

From a thousand warning signs, the troops could see that something large was again being prepared - indeed, something on a scale beyond anything already experienced. The illusion that the year's fighting was over rapidly vanished. Had the other signs not been sufficient, the zeal with which military exercises alternated with parades and exhortations would have been enough. Specialist lecturers were joined by senior officers and the more daring generals, who, giving vent to secret literary ambitions, sought to rival professional writers and speakers in oratorical and dialectical skill, in order to kindle faith and enthusiasm among the grey mass of soldiers.

At the beginning of August, General Ravazza, commander of XXV Army Corps, allowed himself the following statements while addressing the Pinerolo Brigade:

> The eyes of Pinerolo's riflemen are turned towards the Karst, towards its glorious summits; their thoughts are turned towards their fallen comrades, whose example will lead them to new victories and new glories, until Italy's destiny is fulfilled...

In the Second Army, some restraint upon stereotyped verbosity was imposed by General Capello himself, who was little persuaded by the rhetorical and bombastic tone of such declamations. Capello had already humiliated Federzoni by replacing him in the middle of an address when he noticed that the soldiers were reacting badly to the nationalist deputy's words. By speech and circular, he tried to make subordinate commands understand that simple, persuasive and human ideas must be chosen when addressing the troops - he who so often forgot humanity himself. As usual, however, these exhortations were misunderstood by dull and servile subordinates, so that the lectures, instead of becoming culture and recreation, became a torment, a plague, "propaganda by coercion", as the Commission of Inquiry into Caporetto later called them.

In the Third Army, the Duke of Aosta enthusiastically took much of the burden of lecturing upon himself, delivering no fewer than eleven "orations" between mid-June and mid-August. On 29 July

Emanuele Filiberto reviewed the Toscana Brigade, a recent victim of the Karst and the Timavo. Parade, presentation of decorations, order of the day:

> Grenadiers of Tuscany!
>
> The enemy fears you and calls you "Wolves". Be proud of this name, which sums up your daring and strength; for you succeeded in driving him from the defences in which he had burrowed and believed himself impregnable, as wolves drive sheep from the mountain on which they wish to remain masters.

Insensitive to the humiliation he bestowed upon the soldiers by accusing them of having fought against a flock of sheep, the Duke continued undaunted in his Italo-French style:

> And I am certain that the proud Wolves of the Toscana Brigade, with their ardent thirst for victory, their courage and their tenacity, will know how to press the grim enemy closely once again and strike him down, as one strikes down the beast that thirsts for our blood and threatens our dwelling.

This supplied the description of a wild beast that fitted a sheep rather badly.

On 16 August at San Giorgio di Nogaro, while distributing decorations granted motu proprio, the commander of the Third Army again gave free rein to his eloquence:

> I imagine you, my brave men, strong and impetuous as a torrent which, having broken its banks, overflows and sweeps away everything it finds beneath its hands.

"His Highness did not find eloquence easy today," commented one of the decorated men. The revised account, published in the official collection of the Duke of Aosta's proclamations, corrected the error by speaking of a river "which sweeps away everything opposing its course". Yet the continuation of the purified edition of this speech was no less formidable:

> I am certain that, when the Fatherland calls you to new trials, you will know how to advance along that radiant road of glory which you have already opened before you amid difficulties no less great... With this vision, my thoughts turn to your glorious fallen brothers, to whom I send a salute filled with pride and honour...

And from time to time there was a sprinkling of Latin: Victoria nobis vita, particularly welcome to the illiterate soldiers.

The orgy of lectures that suddenly descended upon the troops between spring and summer 1917 was intended to be skilfully measured, so as to galvanise more effectively the units destined for the greatest risks. The most polished speakers, such as D'Annunzio and Father Semeria - sweetmeats reserved for units sent into the furnace - were therefore feared as much as the distribution of certain comforts, cognac and chocolate, which unfailingly announced bloody assaults. Awareness of these emotional reactions was nevertheless very limited. Even General Diaz, commander of XXIII Army Corps in the Karst sector and known for his humanity, was convinced that "if D'Annunzio could speak to the soldiers before every battle, it would be three-quarters won". Trevelyan describes the result of the patriotic lectures:

> Military life seems dull and purposeless to Giuseppe... From time to time the Colonel reads the regiment a speech about the Italian eagle perched upon the highest summit of the Alps, but Giuseppe's comrades mutter: "Whore of a M...! We want to go home!"

The verbal treatment was accompanied by physical treatment: tactical exercises, training and forced marches intended to accustom troops stiffened by trench life once more to mobile warfare. These were useful and splendid things, suggested above all by General Capello's restless mind, concerned at his men's lack of fitness. Eager to adopt original tactical procedures and prepare the soldiers to use newly issued weapons, the commander of the Second Army let slip in a circular that the expression "period of

rest" should be abolished and replaced by another more suitable to describe what troops "at rest" were supposed to do. He therefore appeared as a visitation from heaven, as a sadist, earning the nickname Tristaccio, while his army became "the war industry".

This way of life, the demoralisation following the Tenth Battle - so poor in results and so generous in losses - the increasingly alarming events in Russia and defeatist propaganda caused military discipline to deteriorate still further during the summer of 1917.

What most enraged the troops was that assignment to the most exposed units in Italy struck like taxation: some never paid, while others paid every time. This explains why the Italian army was equally exhausted despite losses amounting to less than one third of the French losses. One general had perfected the machinery of recommendations to the point of sending duplicated circulars to commands down to regimental level, with only the spaces for the date and the name of the man to be placed in a safe billet left to be filled in by hand.

Officers in fighting units spoke with scorn and anger of the Dorta's great trench, the name given to the Udine cafe where officers of the Supreme Command gathered when duty was over. The troops expressed their intolerance through extravagant acts. Troop trains were vandalised in the most destructive manner. Men acquired the habit of firing at herds of cattle from moving trains; and sometimes they aimed at people rather than cattle, as happened to a group of airmen who were fired upon by a trainload of Alpini while walking along the main road parallel to the railway, pursued by the usual curses directed at shirkers. Billets and halting places were irreparably damaged.

An eyewitness relates that replacements travelling towards the front, as they passed through Cividale, pointed with hatred-filled glances at the many civilians and servicemen walking through the streets:

- Shirkers! Look how many shirkers there are in Cividale!

Officers and soldiers stationed in the town therefore ended by disappearing in shame. Medical units, although performing an indispensable task, were not exempt from this wave of hostility. Signorina Mercedes Astuto, a nurse with the Third Army, wrote in her diary:

> 20 August. We are nine kilometres from Hermada.
>
> At night units pass on their way to the firing line. When they see our men and the doctors, they utter poisoned growls.

How long, then, could complete loyalty from the troops be relied upon? At the end of June, the two regiments of the Campobasso Brigade had mutinied as soon as they received orders to return to the line. The skill of the commanding general nevertheless averted the worst. Although taking the appropriate precautions - surrounding the mutineers with loyal troops and training machine guns upon them - he spoke sincerely and reasonably. He advanced alone towards the rebels, persuaded them to abandon their refusal to obey and led them to the line in disciplined order.

The Catanzaro Brigade did not avoid tragedy. Withdrawn from the front after the grave losses suffered on 23 and 24 May, which were added to the many thousands accumulated in previous years, it had been returned to the Hermada front on 4 June as soon as the Austrian counter-offensive developed. Withdrawn again on 24 June, it was quartered at Santa Maria la Longa, a village north-west of Palmanova which the war had filled with tens of thousands of servicemen from every branch.

Listlessness and indiscipline began to spread, nourished by the replacements arriving to refill the decimated units: men recovered from wounds, convicts, and above all shirkers who had finally failed to escape service.

Attilio Frescura writes:

> These men bring with them their desperate and stubborn attachment to life. They know that on the Karst - and in the Catanzaro Brigade - one inevitably dies. There is no hope. Then, like hunted beasts, they defend themselves and cry out for their right to live. And as they die, they attempt their desperate defence.

The village priest, having heard from conversations in the taverns reported to him that something was being plotted, considered it his duty to warn the brigade commander. He was reassured with condescension: it was logical and natural for soldiers to complain; they had always done so. But there was a long distance between that and mutiny.

When the brigade received orders to return to the front, however, the revolt flared up. At 10:30 p.m. on an unspecified day in July, violent rifle fire began and multicoloured rockets rose into the sky, said to be the signal of rebellion to other brigades chafing at the bit. A captain and a lieutenant attached to headquarters were killed, and the disorderly crowd prepared with the worst intentions to attack D'Annunzio's residence.

Translator's note: the printed Italian text omits the day of the month and reads only "at 10:30 p.m. in July".

The officers hid wherever they could, the available carabinieri were deployed, and the alarm was sent to the Supreme Command. In the heart of the night, artillery groups and cavalry squadrons - branches considered more reliable because they had suffered less attrition during the war - surrounded the Catanzaro Brigade. Fighter squadrons crossed the sky.

At about three in the morning the revolt died away of its own accord. As the fumes of alcohol subsided, and without the now numerous troops surrounding the brigade having to intervene, the rebels adopted milder counsels. Clemency was impossible, however: three officers and four carabinieri had been killed. Once the ringleaders were identified, a summary trial was conducted, after which twenty-eight servicemen were sentenced to death, shot and thrown into a common grave.

A few hours later, under a strong escort of cavalrymen and gunners, the Catanzaro was sent back into the Karst inferno. Spirits were still disturbed, for along the road many soldiers threw away their cartridge clips as an act of rebellion. The column was halted again, and another ten unfortunate men, after summary judgement, were condemned and shot.

D'Annunzio, having been drawn into the affair, refused to remain silent. The scene of the execution moved him. "The infantrymen condemned to execution, chosen by lot from the mass of the seditious, were placed with their backs to the grey wall":

> You are peasants. I recognise you by your hands. I recognise you by the way you plant your feet upon the earth. I do not wish to know whether you are innocent or guilty. I know that you were brave and steadfast. The Theban Legion, the sacred Theban Legion, was decimated twice. Are you expiating the guilt? Or are you expiating the contaminated Fatherland, your own contaminated glory?... The God of Italy rearms you and watches you.

Thus the Calabrians of the duly purified "Theban Legion" were permitted, in order to save their lives, to return to their ancient exorcisms. The most widespread consisted in fashioning from straw and rags a hideous effigy representing Death imprisoned, which was thrown beyond the trench accompanied by the foulest insults and most tragic curses. The rite was ineffective on the Karst, where in the following offensive the Catanzaro Brigade was again reduced by half.

Those responsible for the army's efficiency were worried by the multiplication of these signs of intolerance. On 14 August another explosion of discontent occurred in the Rovigo Brigade, which according to information reaching the Austrian espionage service had raised seditious cries:

- To Mauthausen! To Mauthausen!

Mauthausen was the largest Austrian concentration camp. With his characteristic energy, General Petitti di Roreto, commander of XI Corps, convened a military court, which sentenced four men to death and several others to long terms of imprisonment. By mistake, only three of those condemned to death were shot, together with one man sentenced to life imprisonment. The error was remedied by also shooting the remaining man condemned to death. One might be tempted to believe this was a slander by Avanti! [14], were it not confirmed by the memoirs of General Francesco Rocca, commander of the 63rd Division, of which the Rovigo Brigade formed part. Rocca recalls the "deplorable error", which led to a long and "painful" inquiry from which the general emerged "unscathed".

The mutinies among units of the Italian army during the summer of 1917, while not remotely approaching the scale upon which they spread through the French army in May and June 1917, nevertheless involved several tens of thousands of soldiers. Desertions also became more frequent and punishments consequently more severe.

A colonel encountered on a train by Deputy Gasparotto during the night of 12-13 August told him that, after several desertions had occurred in his regiment during July, he had been ordered to carry out a small-scale decimation: two men from each company. Not without repugnance, he summoned the corporals and asked them to place upon the lots the names of those who had behaved worst in the most recent fighting. They replied:

- Colonel, sir, we cannot commit such a crime. Put our names on the lots as well.

The latest proclamation of the Supreme Command, dated 14 August 1917, punished by death after degradation anyone who left his unit when it was about to enter action or even merely about to depart for the front line. Yet the trickle intensified. Two soldiers of the 116th Infantry deserted on the evening of 14 August itself; on the 16th an entire platoon, including a second lieutenant, went over to the enemy from the 206th Infantry of the Lambro Brigade; and on 17 August seventeen servicemen, including two sergeants, deserted from the 116th Infantry of the Treviso Brigade.

The numerical scale of the phenomenon remained modest, but with offensive operations of the highest importance imminent, the danger posed by information deserters could give the enemy was grave. The second lieutenant who deserted from the 206th Infantry confirmed to the Austrians that the eleventh Italian offensive on the Isonzo would be launched on 18 August, Queen Elena's name day.

Yet it was during this period, five days after the mutiny of the Catanzaro Brigade, that General Cadorna recalled in a circular that soldiers must be treated with greater humanity:

> Grave recent acts of indiscipline have occurred among the troops. Once again it has been necessary to resort to an iron summary punishment which admits no hesitation before the supreme interests of the army and the nation.
>
> Today, however, suppressing the guilty is not sufficient to preserve the army's structure sound and safe. Execution is a painful necessity, but represents only one side - the negative side - of all the complex measures that must be taken to raise and strengthen the spirit of the combatants...
>
> Let no commander be absent or unknown to the troops; let the vigorous will of the leaders be present and active everywhere, in the front lines as in the rear. Let nothing be neglected, from the reward of courage - better attended to than it is today - to rest which, while not idleness, is truly restorative;

> from physical exercise to games, from leave to wholesome entertainment, so that the soldier may understand that someone above is concerned for him, that he is not abandoned to every current, and that he is a man treated with human understanding...

One month later, on 18 August 1917, to strike both hoop and barrel, Cadorna drafted a fourth letter of alarm to the Prime Minister, after those of 6, 8 and 13 June. He recalled the mutiny of the Catanzaro Brigade and the desertions occurring shortly before the Battle of the Bainsizza, which had begun that very day. "The evil is worsening in a crescendo filled with dark dangers." "Very sad days await us unless the causes of so much evil are removed." The Government remained silent.

The summer of 1917 did not witness only the spreading instinct of self-preservation and creeping cowardice; it also saw an explosion of reckless courage and the birth of the assault units.

> The assault units were born at Sdricca di Manzano on 29 July 1917 [15] - the same day and month on which Benito Mussolini was born. The coincidence is most remarkable and in any event establishes from the outset a common element between these two forces expressed by the race.

Thus begins one of the many apologetic booklets of the Fascist twenty years. This astrologically inspired pairing forgot that 29 July was the anniversary of another date which could not be celebrated in royal Italy: the assassination of King Umberto in 1900. Combining this third anniversary with the first two did not necessarily produce a particularly fortunate triple for Italian history.

Nor did it help the Arditi after the war to be hammered by Futurist prose as "billionaires of courage" and "breakers of the Monte Carlo Bank of Death": "do they not carry upon them, in their very skin, their cheques of recklessness and violence to throw upon the green baize of battles?"

> They have the white corneas of wolves and the blackest gazes. They also resemble poles charged with electric lightning and surmounted by the warning skull. Perhaps for elegance, or to be embraced more readily by Death, they wear no tie; the neck swollen with blood has burst the social collar.
>
> Upright. Faces towards the sky. Clothed in blessed madness, they possess a physical elegance no London tailor can provide. Those who best wear that cut of intrepidity fall at once, first crumpled, then starched and pressed for ever...
>
> The Arditi were the accelerators of the war. They despised manoeuvres, barracks and marches [16]. Through this love of speed they are also the true record-holders of the war...
>
> Climb up something. Everyone into that tavern without paying. All climb onto the roof of the railway carriage and the driver is forced to stop the locomotive before the tunnel. Scatter through the countryside...

The twenty-five years following the First World War were dominated by this style, produced by the pen of the Academician of Italy F. T. Marinetti, whose heart "poured itself tenderly like pathetic water over the great Arditi dead", the "rapid surgeons of enemy armies". To peasants and innkeepers deprived by unruly Arditi of their rightful earnings or the fruit of their desperately hard labour, it was natural that the "little rogues" should appear in a less sympathetic light.

For years official propaganda thus helped make the Arditi detested, despite the many merits they had earned during the war and the first extraordinary exploits they performed in the summer of 1917. The Germans and Austrians too had their Sturmtruppen, but the absence of deafening propaganda about them and the constant solicitous attention paid to the infantry prevented the development of the mutual antipathy that poisoned relations between Arditi and infantrymen in Italy.

Circular no. 4461 of the Second Army Command, dated 30 August 1917, was certainly not very popular among the decimated infantry brigades. It prescribed, among other things:

> ... Treatment of assault units.
>
> Accommodation: comfortable huts permitting genuine restoration of strength, to be constructed near the training ground in order to avoid unnecessary marches.
>
> Trench duty: members of assault companies shall not perform trench duty with the other units...
>
> Duties in billets: these are not tasks for members of assault companies.

It was therefore clear that ordinary huts were "uncomfortable" and "did not permit genuine rest", and that infantry soldiers had to endure "unnecessary marches".

Among the senior generals, Capello was the first to believe in the usefulness of assault troops. The 1st unit, formed on 29 July, was therefore followed by two more battalions in the Second Army. The Third Army imitated the example belatedly, preparing its first nuclei only in October.

At first, broad standards were adopted in selecting volunteers. A number of scoundrels, attracted by better pay and less exhausting treatment, consequently applied and were accepted with pleasure. Marshal Giardino writes:

> ... the dregs found everywhere... had been... concentrated in some of the old Arditi units, under the mistaken belief... that lost souls were sufficient for daring in war.

It then occurred that this criminal minority, which did not shine through heroism, behaved with particular brutality during the retreat from Caporetto, strengthening the reputation for bloodthirstiness already acquired by the Arditi and branding the whole corps as unscrupulous men. In fact, it was not until December 1917 that convicts were forbidden to enter the assault units.

The Ardito Paolo Giudici writes:

> They said we were criminals, that we were the dregs of society, the leavings of prisons, hooligans, mafiosi, Camorrists, thieves... that the regiments had been purged of their worst elements and assault units formed from them. And these units "produced results" precisely because they consisted of men accustomed to blood and robbery.

An officer of the Black Flames confided: "They have made me understand so many times that these flames are the uniform of criminals that I almost fear I am acting in complete bad faith when I believe myself an honest man." The Arditi took revenge by accepting the legend in their songs:

> In the homeland's prisons no bandits now remain,
> for all have gone to join the Arditi battalion.
> If you wish to make war with brave soldiers,
> go to the cells and take the prisoners.
> If his sentence exceeds six years, make him a corporal;
> if he is serving life, make him a general.

And pathetic anguish emerged from their smiling mouths when they sang:

> The Arditi are soldiers believed to be rogues,
> but they never surrender until every man is dead.

They passed shouting at the tops of their voices in their unusual uniform: the grey-green tunic open upon the chest with black flames on the lapels, the black jersey bearing bones of the dead, their backs

hunched by the hand grenades carried in a pouch formed in the back of the jacket. And there were the carbine, the dagger, the flamethrowers and the black flag.

To the girls who asked them:

> Why do you bear a silver skull upon your breast?
> Why do you wear mourning upon your pennant?

the Arditi explained:

> The black we wear is our own splendid colour;
> within the skull is the image of our first love.

D'Annunzio too was pleased to be consecrated an Ardito "by a young captain who gave me his dagger, not yet thoroughly cleaned of Austrian blood".

Thus the Arditi, ill-treated by rhetoric and regarded by the other branches and the population as bands of praetorians, were destined to play a certain part in Italy's future history - a part no one suspected in July 1917. By considering "active" conduct in war a sin against pacifist faith, and failing to understand that various, multiple and often scarcely explicable reasons led many men to enter assault formations, the neutralist parties automatically handed their opponents a military force, later transformed into a political force, of several tens of thousands of courageous men.

Nor was it foreseen in September 1917 that the Arditi song:

> ...
> When from the trench
> sounds the hour of battle,
> first will be the black flame
> that hurls itself terribly.
> ...
> Youth, youth,
> springtime of beauty...

would haunt Italy for a quarter of a century. Politics, however, was remote from those daring men of the Second Army training at Sdricca di Manzano for their first exploits: assaults upon the most impregnable positions in the entire Austrian deployment, San Marco and San Gabriele.

Despite the bloody losses suffered in May and June, the Italian army had continued to grow. It was true that between 1 April and 1 July the men under arms had fallen from 3,146,000 to 3,042,000, but the strength of the mobilised army had risen from 2,041,000 to 2,270,000 and subsequently, on 19 August, to 2,321,000. This increase resulted from the arrival of the new conscription class and from recoveries obtained by combing the rear areas as far as possible.

Of the total, 150,000 servicemen were operating in Albania and Macedonia and 100,000 were on leave, so that the force present from the Stelvio to the Adriatic amounted to 2,070,000 men, including 70,000 officers.

On 19 August 1917, a large proportion of this army - 208,000 soldiers, corporals and non-commissioned officers and 38,000 officers - was deployed offensively from Monte Nero to Monfalcone over an effective frontage of eighty kilometres. Its numerical distribution by major formation was as follows.

Translator's note: the source prints 208,000 enlisted ranks. The three formation totals immediately below add up to 1,246,000 men, which would correspond to 1,208,000 enlisted ranks plus 38,000 officers. The printed figure has been retained in the translation rather than silently amended.

Forces by major formation

Formation	Men
Second Army	666,000
Third Army	498,000
Reserves at the disposal of the Supreme Command	82,000

Since the Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo proved the greatest military effort ever made by Italy, the list of available means shows how thoroughly the country had been squeezed to arm its men.

Means available for the Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo

Category	Second Army	Third Army	Supreme Command	Total
Infantry, Bersaglieri and Alpini battalions	302	240	66	608
Machine pistols	1,800	1,440	400	3,640
Heavy machine guns	2,850	2,258	552	5,660
Light-calibre artillery	977	584	4	1,565
Medium- and heavy-calibre artillery	1,403	779	-	2,182
Trench mortars	1,199	683	-	1,882
Total non-portable artillery pieces	**3,579**	**2,046**	**4**	**5,629**

The Austro-Hungarian army cut a poor figure in comparison. At that moment Austria had no more than one million men on the Italian front, organised in thirty-two infantry divisions, of which only twenty, totalling 560,000 men, were deployed along the threatened front. It is nevertheless incorrect to maintain that Italy enjoyed a superiority of five to two, because while we were throwing every available man and item of matériel into the struggle, Austria could draw reserves from the Balkan and Russian-Romanian fronts, manoeuvring along interior lines, as indeed happened during the battle. Our superiority was still considerable, and in artillery overwhelming, since the Austro-Hungarian Empire could oppose only 1,526 guns to our 3,747. Determined to stake everything, General Cadorna had reduced almost to the point of imprudence the defences left to guard the five hundred kilometres from the Stelvio to Rombon.

Preparation for the new offensive, the eleventh attempt to break through the Isonzo line, had begun before the Tenth Battle was over. On 28 May General Cadorna had laid down the objectives of the future assault for the commanders of the Third Army and the Gorizia Zone: the Comen plateau for the Third Army and the Ternova plateau for the Gorizia Zone, while the Bainsizza plateau was to constitute for the latter a subsidiary and transitional objective. The Gorizia amphitheatre would be occupied by a tactical group, subordinated now to the Third Army and now to the Gorizia Zone, which would provide a flexible link between the two armies.

Cadorna ordered that preparations "must begin at once and be conducted with the utmost speed". The most exhausted troops were to withdraw within a few days to the second line - the Austrian counter-offensive delayed their recall slightly - in order to be rebuilt and trained. Periods of rest for reorganising personnel and matériel were also to be granted to the field artillery. Large reinforcements would arrive from other portions of the front and from the interior, where sixteen new infantry regiments had been formed between the end of May and mid-July.

As soon as the Gorizia Zone was dissolved and the Second Army reconstituted, extending its jurisdiction as far as Plezzo, General Capello felt the threat from the enemy bridgehead at Tolmino hanging over him like a sword of Damocles. Well connected with the interior of Austria, the Tolmino plain was an ideal area in which to concentrate forces on the right bank of the Isonzo, ready to turn the Second Army.

Cadorna's orders were therefore interpreted broadly by Capello, especially since he had been authorised to widen the attack on his left at his own discretion.

Alongside two "decisive" actions, one directed towards the Chiapovano valley and the other towards the Dol saddle - cutting between San Gabriele and San Daniele and then marching on Ternova - Capello organised a third "decisive" action. By advancing upon the Lom of Tolmino and the Lom of Canale, it would take the Idria valley in reverse and bring about the fall of the Tolmino basin through manoeuvre. "Demonstration" actions were instead prepared in the Mrzli and San Marco sectors. Although supplied with large forces, the Second Army offensive was consequently diluted across a very broad front, weakening its violence. Cadorna nevertheless raised no objections to his brilliant subordinate's programme.

The same did not apply to the Duke of Aosta. He too had submitted his plans: a simultaneous and powerful attack along the whole front. The objective was Hermada, especially by envelopment on the right, and along the Voiscizza-Krapenka axis, judged "the most productive".

Nothing in the whole conception pleased Cadorna. He criticised "the indeterminacy of the operational plan, which oscillates between two contradictory terms: a simultaneous and powerful attack along the whole front and the advance selection of partial breakthrough sectors". Even granting that some sector should have a prevailing function, "I exclude the Voiscizza-Krapenka sector". The estimate of forces was wrong, and so was their division between first-line troops and corps and army reserves. Everything had to be redone: "I therefore request Your Royal Highness to reconsider the problem."

Emanuele Filiberto hastened to reply that he wished "to dispel every doubt from Your Excellency's mind" and that the plan would be modified as desired: a simultaneous offensive along the whole front, with no preferred directions. It was a frontal attack in the finest style, according to the conceptions prevailing at the Supreme Command: "[Renunciation] of complicated manoeuvres, envelopments, etc. Violent and simultaneous attack..."

The Supreme Command issued further recommendations on the control of troops during battle. Fresh and exhausted forces were not to be mixed; the latter were to be replaced by the former. Moreover, "experience has shown that troops which have remained for a long time in the front line are poorly suited to launching a powerful attack, and that as a rule it is advisable to give them a period of rest beforehand". The Tenth Battle of the Isonzo had evidently taught something, for on 4 August the recommendation not to exhaust the infantry's powers of resistance was repeated: "do not continue the attrition of the troops to the point - which, moreover, is reached very quickly - beyond which they no longer provide practical value".

Despite correcting his ideas, the Duke of Aosta received a second series of reprimands. According to Cadorna, the Third Army had provided for "a concentration and excessive closeness among the various elements in the deployment of the front-line battalions, such as to cancel... the advantages deriving from a rational division of forces among observation groups, trenches of first resistance and supports. Any fire action directed upon the trench of first resistance and any attack by enemy infantry would involve all three of the above elements simultaneously..." The conclusion was: "Army-corps commanders will provide for a reduction of the forces in the front line..."

Once matters had finally been arranged according to the Generalissimo's taste, the Duke of Aosta could devote himself to details, such as the exact hour of the assault: "The watches are to be regulated so that H-hour [17] is the same for all. Army-corps commands may request the time at any moment from the Army Command telephone exchange. I forbid the use of the telephone below divisional commands to transmit the exact time." This extremely strict provision was nevertheless violated extensively.

The arrangements for tactical preparation were a mixture of common sense and commonplaces. The infantry's leap forward "must take place with absolute surprise"; the advance must be "lightning-fast and simultaneous"; there must be "cooperation of action between infantry and artillery"; and "no provision will ever be sufficient to ensure the supply of water... this precious means of refreshment must in no way be lacking to the fighting troops during the days of action". The horrible deaths of many wounded lying between the opposing lines during the May battle remained in everyone's memory. "But above all," the Duke of Aosta warned, "there is required that burning faith in success which, flowing from the leaders, animates, cements and carries forward the mass, multiplies the energies of action and leads to the greatest results, triumphing over every resistance offered by men and material means."

More practically, General Capello encouraged the reorganisation of the troops by removing "every bureaucratic encumbrance" and studying means "whether or not sanctioned by regulations in force" to give units organic cohesion. "Promotion, without regard to seniority, of the most suitable elements." At a conference on 4 August, the commander of the Second Army then proclaimed principles new both to others and to himself, principles which he himself would shortly fail to follow:

> It is necessary to save human lives; it is necessary to achieve victory all the same, without squandering the treasure the country has given us [18]. We must find ourselves ready for every eventuality; but if we wear out the instrument in our hands, it may happen that when the last blow must be struck the instrument will no longer serve us and will no longer be tempered. What causes the instrument to wear out? The irrational manner in which the troops are employed.

"We must recognise," Capello continued the following day, "that the Austrians are masters at rebuilding units. They know how to withdraw the troops in time, restore them rapidly and return them to the line after a few days in full efficiency." In our army, he continued, the error was to batter fighting units so thoroughly that within a few days they became herds of sleepwalkers, whose reconstruction required weeks rather than days.

Capello, a modern spirit, also willingly resorted to psychology. After the failed assault upon Hermada, the 149th Infantry, one of the regiments of the Trapani Brigade, had been disbanded with Roman severity and its men scattered to the four winds. Capello ordered the regiment reconstituted, diplomatically called the soldiers "sons", and had its colours returned in an official ceremony at which he was represented by General Vanzo, commander of XXVII Army Corps. "With the radiant vision of the coming triumph", Vanzo saluted "this sacred standard", entrusting it "to their courage, certain that they would know how to carry it victoriously to the place where Italy's destinies will be fulfilled" - though not Vanzo's own destiny, for he was badly torpedoed within ten days.

The gentle method also included the latest lectures which, on Capello's orders, breathed a "social" atmosphere and circulated daring slogans and promises that would be inconvenient or difficult to fulfil after the war: land to the peasants and the factory to the workers. Faithful to this new vision of the world, the commander of the 277th Infantry explained to his soldiers that they were fighting for democracy:

> It is you, O soldiers, who are fighting this war; to you, sons of the people, will go the first fruits of the advantages, progress, rights and affirmations...

For the sceptics, however, the iron fist was always ready, as Frescura recalls:

> The orders that the action be carried through to the end are ferociously severe: our men will have field batteries and machine guns firing into their backs as soon as they hesitate...
>
> And the doctors of the Medical Section must send the lightly wounded back to the line, although there are slight wounds that are exceedingly painful...
>
> There is a good medical major - more doctor than major - who is furious at this order, against which all his humanist science revolts.

While the men were being prepared, weapons and matériel were accumulated. Grand preparations were required to cross the Isonzo under enemy fire and throw the planned fourteen bridges between Pod-Selo and Auzza. General Caviglia writes:

> The great heavy boats descended the steep mule tracks during the night, one by one and in the deepest silence, mounted on two-wheeled carts with solid tyres. On reaching the riverbank opposite the selected bridge sites, they were progressively camouflaged and hidden behind ruined houses and beneath the small railway and road bridges following the river. At each site, twice the material required to build one bridge was assembled.

For the first time little Italy prepared to wage war like a great lady. The bridging troops were nevertheless worried by their task, especially as a great deal was demanded of each man. A booklet issued by the engineer command in the summer of 1917 on a new type of light footbridge to be laid upon special small girders stated that these girders - weighing seventy kilograms - "could be carried in the arms or on the shoulder by one soldier".

Would it be physically possible to build the bridges in the enemy's face? To guarantee the bridging troops safety and tranquillity, everything that military technology could offer was prepared. Numerous searchlights were distributed along the Isonzo to dazzle the Austrian observers; two particularly powerful electric searchlights were to blind any enemy searchlights surviving the preparatory bombardment; and smoke-generating devices were made ready. The best guarantee, however, was the formidable deployment of artillery and trench mortars, which in that sector outnumbered the enemy by four to one and would force the Austrians to keep their heads down throughout the operation.

Nor was that all. At Caporetto on the upper Isonzo, a temporary dam was being built capable of retaining the river's flow for several hours. Without explicitly explaining why, on 10 August General Caviglia prophesied to his troops that "studies indicate that on the 19th, between 4 and 10 a.m., the Isonzo will be at low water": an explanation more mysterious than no explanation at all.

Almost five million artillery shells were available, and trains arriving continuously from the industrial regions would refill the depots as they were emptied. In the Second Army alone, the transport of ammunition occupied twenty-four trains each day.

Meticulous and attentive observation, supplemented by aerial reconnaissance, had located the headquarters of the principal enemy commands along the Isonzo. Day by day, the inspections made by Austrian linemen along telephone cables were followed, allowing the routes of the lines to be identified. On sunny days, another means of discovery was the glittering flash of wires moved by the wind. Further information had been supplied by deserters, including a Czech captain who provided highly valuable details.

Preparations on this scale impressed and encouraged our troops. Enormous motor columns, the continual arrival of trains, the emplacement of ever more batteries and the multiplication of the telecommunications network gave for the first time a sense of overwhelming power. Witnesses agree at

least upon this point: no one complained of having too little. The troops themselves, although they had become more cautious and sparing of their own lives, General Caviglia says, were also more experienced and battle-hardened.

The undertaking upon which the Italian army was embarking nevertheless exceeded its strength and, above all, its ability to move. The problem of supplying the two hundred thousand men who were expected to spread across the arid Bainsizza plateau in August was seriously underestimated. Baj-Macario writes: "There was no exact appreciation of the magnitude of the logistical problem... We must admit manfully that preparation was deficient in essential respects, so that the operation contained within itself the germ that would make it slow, heavy and difficult to develop, and would paralyse it."

The conception governing the employment of the artillery was pregnant with negative consequences, and responsibility for it belonged to General D'Alessandro, its commander. In a memorandum prepared for the occasion, the leading expert wrote that "artillery could, by moving from one point of the battlefield to another - assisted by the abundance of today's mechanical traction - adapt itself to the changing and unforeseen contingencies of the struggle". From this logical premise, however, exactly the opposite was deduced: "the solution to the problem [of following the infantry advance] must be sought in the principle that new situations will be met without changing position." "The infantry's manoeuvre of movement must be matched by the artillery's manoeuvre of fire."

The attacking army was thus given exceedingly short legs: the ten or twelve kilometres representing the maximum range of the medium calibres, although field artillery was easier to move. Yet the objectives to be reached, the Chiapovano depression and the Ternova forest, lay well beyond artillery range. There was therefore an inconsistency between the manoeuvre of movement and the excessively short manoeuvre of fire. Apparently no one considered it until the infantry, having emerged beyond the protective curtain, found themselves beneath the fire of the small but well-directed Austrian artillery. In this way, the enormous superiority we enjoyed in the Middle Isonzo sector was wasted and disappeared at once after the short advance.

Another cause of weakness was the short time available for preparation. Whether one liked it or not, sixty days were few in which to mount so complex and gigantic a battle. Haste, a bad counsellor, caused a degree of chaos and inefficiency to be tolerated.

One example was supplied by the training of trench-mortar personnel. Artillery officers continuously flowed into their cadres, while dismounted cavalry officers were sent into the artillery to fill the vacancies. Captain Flores writes:

> Even today the criterion then followed in selecting commanders of trench-mortar batteries and groups is inexplicable. During 1916 and almost all of 1917, captains and majors were removed from artillery batteries and groups at the front and transferred to the trench-mortar arm, while cavalry subalterns and captains were transferred into the artillery with orders to place them in command of units, as though commanding a trench-mortar group or battery were more difficult than commanding an equivalent unit of guns or howitzers!... The results were damaging to the discipline, cohesion and fighting power of the units rearranged in this way.

As for the trench-mortar soldiers, in the summer of 1917 they came from convalescent depots or calls for volunteers within infantry units. Those who necessarily came into command contact with these "volunteers" did not always find them to their liking: damned souls, dangerous elements who had experienced the pleasure of violence, professional "killers" who combined undoubted courage with a desire for plunder and intolerance of discipline. In some ways they were more dangerous than the Arditi, whose "daring" had limits imposed from above.

By mid-August the deployment of artillery and infantry divisions had been completed. It still did not appear that the Austrians were recalling forces from the Eastern Front, although they were already bringing them in from the Trentino front. Naturally, the Austrians were informed of our preparations. Deserters, spies, their own eyes and we ourselves informed them. Baj-Macario writes:

> It also appears, from what I have gathered while gleaning reports in the Austro-Hungarian press, that during those days our airmen may have dropped leaflets upon the enemy positions in the hope of impressing the defenders, announcing that the drumfire of the new offensive would possess unparalleled power. If this is true, so extraordinary an invention could only be deplored.

There was more: the intensification of night bombing by three-engined Capronis in the Chiapovano valley, the registration of artillery fire, and the closure of the Italian frontier with Switzerland.

As had never happened before, the Italian preparations seriously worried the Austro-Hungarian Command. The Austrians felt that perhaps this time they would not succeed - and if they did, they would not succeed the next time - while the blockade was strangling Austria and people were already dying of hunger in Istria and Dalmatia. The Italian threat had to be removed permanently at any cost. For this, however, German aid had to be requested...

Meanwhile tension grew among the Austro-Hungarian combatants, together with fever and the nightmare of the approaching attack, against which they had to trust in God and their lucky star. Although the Italian soldier and officer remained inadequately trained combatants, if always brave, the technical means with which Italy had equipped its army in the brief period of two years had become imposing.

Austrian reserves, on the other hand, were scarce, and the few available were positioned chiefly to protect Trieste. The city retained all its material and moral importance, although its population had fallen from 200,000 to 70,000 inhabitants and 10,000 houses stood empty. It was, in short, a rear-area city from which unreliable elements - that is, most of the inhabitants - had been removed and confined in the interior of the monarchy, so that the population consisted mainly of soldiers on leave and prostitutes. On the Middle Isonzo, where the Italian attack appeared most dangerous, there were few troops and they were difficult to supply because of the lack of roads and transport.

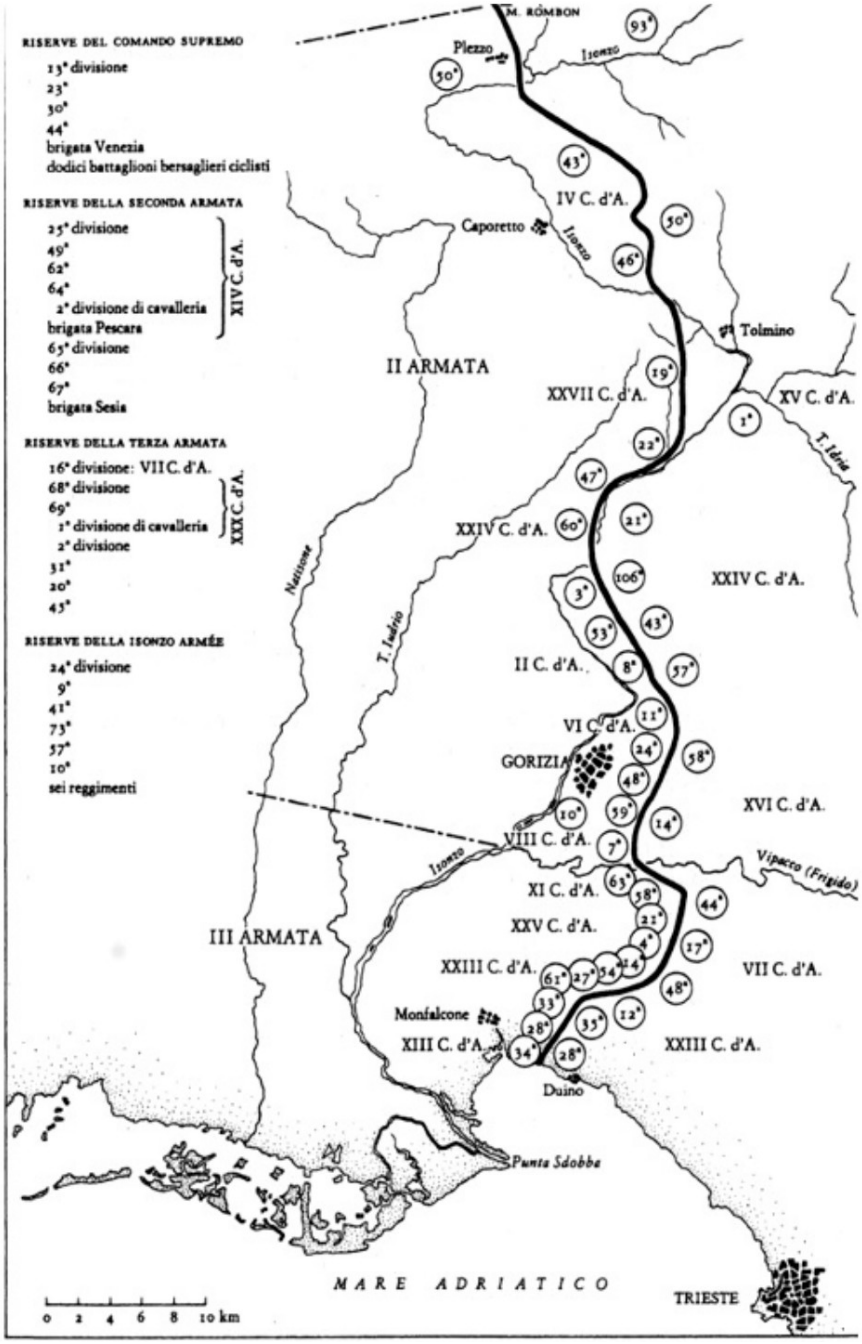
Crouching in the caves which the Austro-Hungarian Supreme Command had prudently caused to be built in great numbers, so that everyone from the Adriatic to Tolmino could find shelter, the soldiers awaited H-hour. They were few and hungry, but still well armed with the weapons produced at full speed by the Skoda works, where 200,000 labourers were then employed.

H-hour arrived at 4 p.m. on Friday, 17 August, when the Italian artillery transformed its ranging fire into destructive fire.

On that day, those admitted to the secrets of the operation glanced nervously at their stopwatches, waiting for the moment when the sporadic, intermittent Italian preparatory bombardment would turn into destructive fire. It did so punctually. The rate of fire assumed a new rhythm, although it was still distinct from the characteristic roar of the rapid fire preceding an assault. The orders were to continue until far into the night with aimed fire upon targets identified beforehand: headquarters, batteries and observation posts.

During Friday night and throughout Saturday, the rhythm merged into a terrifying, lacerating din which seemed intent on piercing the stomach and shattering every mental and physical faculty. The earth trembled ceaselessly beneath the dreadful reverberation of medium-calibre batteries hidden in underground caverns. The 75-mm field batteries, exposed beneath the burning sun, fired at a fantastic rate, served by bare-chested gunners. Here and there stood a gun overturned by enemy counter-battery

fire, surrounded by the tragic circle of its gun crews and officers.



7. The Eleventh Battle: Italian deployment on 19 August 1917.

Supreme Command reserves: 13th, 23rd, 30th and 44th Divisions; Venezia Brigade; twelve Bersaglieri cyclist battalions.

Second Army reserves: 25th, 49th, 62nd and 64th Divisions; 2nd Cavalry Division; Pescara Brigade (grouped in XIV Corps); 65th, 66th and 67th Divisions; Sesia Brigade.

Third Army reserves: 16th Division (VII Corps); 68th and 69th Divisions and 1st Cavalry Division (XXX Corps); 2nd Cavalry Division; 31st, 20th and 45th Divisions.

Isonzo Army reserves: 24th, 9th, 41st, 73rd, 57th and 10th Divisions; six regiments.

With their ears protected by plugs of cotton wool, the combatants waited for the moment of attack and, despite the uproar gripping their heads like a vice, savoured the last hours in which life was still secure. The enemy artillery remained silent, answering from time to time with sudden concentrations directed chiefly against obligatory passages and shelter areas.

One might suppose that every word and every rhetorical expression had been exhausted in descriptions of the previous ten battles. Yet the imagination of the war correspondents bordered on the miraculous. Arnaldo Fraccaroli telegraphed:

> From Tolmino to the sea, everything is a fantastic censer, an immense conflagration... Behind us the infantry remains calm in shelters and caverns... The infantrymen possess a great sense of security. While encamped at rest they have watched the phenomenal work of preparation in recent weeks. They have seen guns, guns, guns pass by. They have seen ammunition, ammunition, ammunition pass by. The Austrian guns attempt to strike the roads and the camps and lose themselves while searching for our batteries, which fire from no one knows where...
>
> I am gathering the first news of the bombardment. Wire entanglements and several trenches on the river in the Canale area have been wrecked; defences on Monte Santo have crumbled; passages have been opened in the wire at San Gabriele, Tivoli and San Marco. Corridors are opening for the irruption of our infantry...

To those admiring the spectacle from afar, the horizon appeared as a red meteor of fire, dotted at each new explosion by tiny, intensely bright lights bursting into flames of a thousand colours in every direction.

Beneath this storm, the nervous tension of the Austrian units awaiting the attack became unbearable. The front-line divisions, compressed by anguish within the caverns, watched the hour of battle approach with a sense of liberation.

On the Second Army front, from Monte Nero to Gorizia, the cannonade intensified as the day advanced, and gas shells were widely employed to put out of action the crews of guns not directly hit. Towards evening, all the technical precautions devised for crossing the Isonzo began to be implemented along the deployment of XXIV and XXVII Army Corps, which were preparing to ferry 100,000 men onto the left bank, strongly defended by the Austrians.

Fortune, kind to General Caviglia, commander of XXIV Corps, proved harsh to General Vanzo, commander of XXVII Corps. Once darkness fell, the first attempts to construct the bridges met the fiercest resistance from indomitable enemy positions which the devastating fire had failed to annihilate. The Austro-Hungarian combatants, whatever their race or nationality, appeared possessed not by a desire to survive, but by the satanic wish to perish in the company of the largest possible number of enemies.

From the heights occupied by the left wing of II Army Corps, still commanded by General Badoglio, the fighting was plainly visible. II Corps included the Firenze Brigade, in whose 127th Regiment Ardengo Soffici was serving:

> Around Rodez and Deskla the struggle was raging. From Britof, together with the furious clamour of the machine guns and the crackle of rifle fire, came the cries of infantry thrown into the assault. Our searchlights and the Austrian ones flooded the valley with a moving, milky radiance within which radiant stars of white light blossomed and stems and flowers of rockets shone, green and red: dense, rapid signals to every battery near and far... The artillery roars and barks without interruption.
>
> In the bowels of the earth the labour of the guns is immense. Between one discharge and the next, the recoil of the pieces creates underground a revolving din like that of a printing works, through

> which whistle blasts and the officers' commands can sometimes be distinguished... Besides the batteries close to us, hundreds of others reveal themselves on every side, for the moment has come to play against the enemy with all cards on the table. The deep, dark valleys around us flash at every instant with little flames and momentary lightning that fills the sky with the violet glare of a thunderstorm. This is the final phase, which will continue until tomorrow morning with ever greater force. The Austrians do not reply.

Among the bridges to be built, the most important was the northernmost one at Javor. The commander of XXVII Corps relied heavily upon it to channel the 22nd Division through the dark and gloomy valley cut by the Vogercek stream and reach as quickly as possible the heights commanding the Idria valley and Tolmino. An unfortunate short round from an Italian trench mortar, however, struck the largest dump of bridging matériel squarely, slaughtering boats and bridging troops. Despite frantic attempts at improvised repair, the Javor bridge finally had to be abandoned, and the troops intended to cross there - V Alpini Group with light artillery - were diverted to the ferries farther downstream.

The next bridge, at Doblar, was equally unfortunate and, after being laboriously assembled during the night, had to be withdrawn the following morning because of the severe damage it had suffered. The two Ronzina bridges met the same fate. Only the bridge at Loga, already in the XXIV Corps sector, could be used by the troops of XXVII Corps. Their manoeuvre was thereby distorted: instead of advancing east and north-east, they moved south-east in support of Caviglia's troops rather than conducting an independent movement.

In front of XXIV Corps, deployed between Loga and Anhovo, matters went better. Three bridges and a footbridge were thrown under enemy fire, and by the end of the day the Isonzo had been forced along the entire sector, with 1,500 prisoners captured. The village of Canale, which the Austrians had converted into a fortress by excavating shelters seven or eight metres below street level, was flattened on Caviglia's orders by the converging fire of two hundred heavy guns and outflanked by the 12th Bersaglieri Regiment. By the evening of the 19th there was no doubt that the operation would continue successfully on the following day, with fresh reinforcements arriving and the planned bridges completed.

II Army Corps, supported along a seven-kilometre front by more than seven hundred guns and trench mortars, was to descend from Kuk and Vodice towards Kobilek, while its 8th Division attempted another ascent of the impregnable Monte Santo. Since the troops were already on the left bank of the Isonzo, the attack did not depend upon the uncertain outcome of a river crossing and was fixed for six o'clock on the morning of the 19th.

The usual brigades of proven courage - Udine and Firenze, Teramo and Girgenti, Forlì and Avellino - hurled themselves impetuously against the enemy. While the first two made some progress towards Deskla and east of the Rohot stream, the 53rd Division under Prince Gonzaga, containing the Teramo and Girgenti Brigades, lost 3,000 men in a few hours while attempting to descend the flank of Vodice. “A few daring men of the Teramo,” writes the historian of the Italian brigades, “manage to reach the enemy line, but well-positioned machine guns bring their courage to an end.” For three days the division remained established upon the rounded summit of Vodice, devastated by continual artillery fire.

As for the 8th Division, formed by the Forlì and Avellino Brigades, another frontal assault upon Monte Santo proved impossible. The Forlì reached the enemy wire and “remained there throughout the day, serenely enduring grave losses” - more than 1,300 men, including thirty officers. Reduced by 8,000 men before evening, II Corps made no small contribution to the day's total losses, which exceeded 30,000 men between Monte Nero and the sea.

The course of operations during the following days was heavily conditioned by the events of the first day. XXVII Corps continued to mark time or move laboriously against a few ragged companies which offered desperate resistance, exploiting every irregularity of the ground. There then began a contest between General Capello's anger and impatience and General Vanzo's feverish anxiety as he sought at all costs to save himself.

By the evening of the 19th, XXVII Corps had ferried only six battalions to the left bank of the Isonzo north of the Avscek stream, while another two had crossed farther south in the sector of XXIV Corps, which had itself ferried no fewer than fourteen. Even so small a force would have been sufficient, for Colonel Pitreich admitted:

> Had the Italians resolutely entered and advanced up the Avscek valley, driving a wedge between the Austrian XV and XXIV Army Corps, we could have offered them no serious obstacle.

The slowness of our advance instead allowed the alarmed reinforcements to arrive: six battalions from Tyrol and Carinthia and the 37th Schützen Regiment from the Idria valley.

In prescribing operations for the 20th, General Capello ordered XXVII Corps to:

> act energetically to strengthen the Alpini group's operation. XXVII Corps must exploit the favourable situation which surprise has created for us in that sector of the front.

During the following day, while promising support from the artillery on the right of IV Corps, he warned XXIV and XXVII Corps that “the weak enemy forces should today have permitted a more considerable advance along a large part of the front”. It was therefore necessary to seize the fleeting moment and move forward resolutely.

Yet the 20th, fruitful for Caviglia, again passed uselessly for General Vanzo. V Alpini Group and the Ferrara and Trapani Brigades seemed to move through pitch. Still extremely far from their first objectives, they attempted to advance in a direction diverging from them.

General Vanzo began to feel the ground burning under his feet. The order he issued at 9:15 p.m. on Monday the 20th betrayed his nervousness. The enemy, he said, was “shaken” and lacked reserves; it would therefore be “shameful” not to exploit the situation. In truth, that was everyone's desire: to advance as far as possible with the fewest losses by exploiting the situation.

> Tomorrow, therefore, the objectives assigned to the corps for the first phase must be reached at any cost. I accept neither reasons for stopping nor ambiguous decisions... The commander of the 22nd Division is to resolve the situation at Auzza at any cost without thereby halting the march towards his objectives... Advance beneath the arc of the trajectories.

A few hours later the same ideas and anxieties were repeated in a further operation order which, once again, contained nothing in practical terms. The advance to reach the Idria ridge was to continue “at any cost” and “without hesitation”, since it was indispensable to overlook the valley on the 22nd and dominate the Tolmino bridgehead:

> I have already communicated these orders by telephone to the commanders concerned, adding that no reason must delay their execution and that I shall hold them personally responsible if they are not carried out in full.

The commander of XXVII Corps nevertheless devoted not one word to explaining how the exceedingly familiar objectives were to be reached. They had to be reached, and that was all. While he listed them once again - the line from Santa Lucia to Grudenka - his troops were fighting heavily much farther south, scarcely a kilometre east of the Isonzo.

Capello began to show impatience and was seen openly enraged during the 21st. To be reinvigorated, General Vanzo required Capello's “treatment” and “pressure” - Capello's own words. For generals, being taken under Capello's care meant entering a coma. Capello suffered from insomnia; although it sometimes left him dazed by day, it kept him awake at night. The telephone on his bedside table was the instrument of torture with which he fired point-blank at his subordinates. Artillery observers and minor commands did not escape his supervision and lived with their nerves stretched taut.

Vanzo received special treatment: twenty-seven or twenty-eight calls a day and volleys of abuse that left him trembling and in tears. Colonel Egidi, Chief of Staff of the Second Army, increased the dose by working in parallel upon his counterpart at XXVII Corps: beware of false steps, and remember Garioni. Ill in his own right and stupefied by agitation, Vanzo could do nothing but pass the threats down to the divisional and brigade commanders, in turn promising removals, torpedoings and executions.

Hoping to make Vanzo's task easier, Capello inserted XIV Army Corps, recently formed, between XXVII and XXIV Corps. Since the difficulty of supplying the troops on the Bainsizza was already grave, adding another army corps made the problem still more complex. It was not men or supplies that were lacking, but the ability to ferry them across the Isonzo.

At last, on 22 August, XXVII Corps had prepared a suitable deployment for the assault upon the Lom heights. Austrian reinforcements had also arrived, however, and the defence had stiffened. The attack upon Kak, launched around midday, ended in almost complete failure.

Meanwhile General Capello had summoned his principal “collaborators” to Globocak. His mood was black, his speech cutting and readily insulting. General Pacini, commander of the 22nd Division, and Colonel Tarditi, commander of V Alpini Group, were dismissed on the spot. He was not much gentler with General Vanzo, his former subordinate:

- You tell me that you require a mass of fire in order to manoeuvre. Very well. By the end of today you will have another two 105-mm groups, but the height must be taken tomorrow.

The unhappy Vanzo, placed beneath the press, instructed his Chief of Staff, Colonel Maggiolini, to assume personal responsibility for the operation:

> Tomorrow the advance upon the objectives assigned yesterday will continue... I confirm the absolute and urgent necessity that those objectives be attained, adding that no reason must delay the execution of this order and that I shall hold the commanders personally responsible if it is not carried out in full.

Vanzo's order was issued at ten o'clock. At 10:30 p.m. a ringing message from Capello reached him, addressed to every corps of the Second Army. Troops which had reached their objectives were to remain satisfied with their success. The others, driven by regret that their duty had not yet been completed, were to strive towards them “with all their strength”.

The new attack upon the Lom heights was developed during the night of 22-23 August and proved bloodily sterile. Exploiting the harsh terrain, the Austrians were now capable of holding in check the numerous forces attacking them. V Alpini Group made some progress, but the troops of the 22nd Division were repulsed with heavy losses.

General Vanzo had now finished suffering. On the morning of the 23rd, together with news of the failures, he received the torpedo and the order to hand over immediately to General Badoglio. General Montuori, commanding XX Corps on the Asiago plateau, was selected to take over II Corps, at whose head Badoglio had so far not particularly distinguished himself. Two crises of command occurred in a single day.

One might expect the new commander of XXVII Corps to have reached at once every objective missed by his predecessor. Nothing of the kind occurred. At 9:30 a.m. on the 23rd, after a summary examination, General Badoglio concluded that the Alpini groups and the Ferrara Brigade were by then unusable, that the roads were horribly congested, and that the attack must be postponed for several days. “It did not matter to him,” he wrote to Capello, “if he had several more enemy battalions in front of him, but everything had to be organised securely, after which everyone, down to the last man, could be required to do his duty.” At four o'clock that afternoon he telegraphed Second Army Command:

> ... In order to reorganise the units and coordinate the operation, I have ordered every operation to be suspended.

From his comfortable retirement, General Vanzo could have maintained with perfect justice that anyone could have performed this task honourably, since it required no thunderbolt of war.

Capello's torpedoing fury also brushed XXIV Corps, whose 60th Division lost its commander Novelli, replaced by General Squillace. Otherwise Capello had nothing but reason to rejoice over General Caviglia, who gave both him and Cadorna the satisfaction denied by Vanzo.

Caviglia's army corps had begun to crumble the enemy front. The capture of Canale by an enveloping manoeuvre was a masterstroke, a lively novelty in which the General took pleasure. He speaks of himself as follows:

> It was certainly necessary to have one's hand upon the pulse of the battle, and therefore to see it in its various aspects, in order to order those brief tactical actions at a glance. Success could be assured because no one was prepared against tactical manoeuvre, either on a small or a large scale.

Fratta and Semmer were captured on Monday the 20th. The following day saw the fall of Kuk 711, the investment of Ossoinca, and Oscedrik and Jelenik threatened with envelopment. Reinforcements meanwhile continued to arrive from the right bank of the Isonzo.

Already on the 20th, Caviglia had wanted the Bersaglieri of the 47th Division to enter the pass between the Vrh basin and the Avscek Potok valley in order to turn Oscedrik. The commanders of the 47th Division and V Bersaglieri Brigade did not feel able to attempt it, judging their forces still insufficient. In accordance with his usual behaviour, then considered revolutionary and damaging to military discipline, Caviglia set aside the “at any cost”, “without hesitation” and similar phrases with which Army Command flooded him. He allowed subordinates in whom he placed complete confidence to judge with their own minds, convinced that “in such daring operations the man carrying them out must be thoroughly persuaded of their success, in order to execute them without hesitation and with impetus; otherwise they fail”.

The assault upon Jelenik therefore took place on the afternoon of 22 August. Caviglia was satisfied with the soldiers' behaviour:

> Despite his impatience, the corps commander admired the quick, unhampered movements of those troops, which reflected the serenity of the man directing them... Could any infantry other than Italian troops manoeuvre in this way at such moments, after remaining for months and months motionless and bogged down in muddy trenches?

Caviglia's secret formula for making the soldiers “work” at their highest efficiency was simple. Unlike many of his colleagues, he believed that troops gave the utmost of themselves and that demanding anything more was not the sublime art of command but a glaring error. These principles achieved the “small victory” of the Bainsizza, which for XXIV Corps was nevertheless a great victory.

While the assault upon Jelenik was in progress, Cadorna reached the corps observation post and was pleasantly surprised to find that our troops were already near the summit. Caviglia briefly explained the manoeuvre and expressed the hope that on the following day he could free the flank of II Corps, still pinned down. Cadorna left him exclaiming, “Fine times, those of manoeuvre!” He formed so flattering an opinion of Caviglia that years later he revealed that, had he been asked to name a successor when deprived of command, he would have proposed General Caviglia.

Soon after Cadorna's departure, the King arrived, and Point 788 was captured under his eyes. Oscedrik, witness to furious fighting, held out briefly. After its capture, painful traces of the struggle were found in layers of enemy and Italian corpses lying alternately one above another, in broken and abandoned weapons, and in shattered and uprooted trees.

Except for a few islands of resistance, the entire Austrian line from Auzza to Kobilek had now been captured or gravely breached, and the two Austrian divisions defending the Bainsizza plateau were short of men and had been driven into the open. There was therefore hope that a fifteen-kilometre breach had opened in the Austrian front, the prelude to the longed-for breakthrough. Its ultimate consequences might even be the collapse of the Isonzo front, the capture of a large part of the enemy army and the envelopment of Trieste.

It did not matter that XXVII Corps had failed to reach the Lom heights, that II Corps was still behind, that VI and VIII Corps were being bloodily held in check east of Gorizia, or that the Third Army was burning itself out terribly on the Karst. The breach opened by XXIV Corps could channel the “flood of humanity” Capello had promised as soon as the breakthrough occurred. The Austrians' fierce defence of the other positions would then become useless; they would have to retreat far to the east, and in the chaos of a forced withdrawal anything was possible. General Caviglia's opinion on this point is exceedingly definite:

> I was convinced then, and remain convinced, that on that day [23 August] there arose the possibility of causing Tolmino to fall on one side and the Gorizia amphitheatre, the Karst and Trieste on the other, and, most important of all, of causing the Austrians to lose a large part of their batteries and troops.

No one else has ever ventured to suggest so optimistic a possibility. Capello did not entertain such a hope at the time either. His operation order issued at 10:30 p.m. on 22 August, while goading XXVII and II Corps with threatening exhortations, prescribed that those which had attained their objectives should settle down defensively, satisfied with the results achieved. Instead of devoting the 23rd to exploiting success, he - an engine usually always racing - devoted it to rest and maintenance.

When the operation resumed on the 24th, several units discovered empty ground before them. Explosions and fires during the night had already suggested that the enemy had begun a retreat, destroying whatever could not be transported. The Italian advance was to resume at ten in the morning, but by seven the Alpini and Bersaglieri operating in the Oscedrik sector, having found no one in front of them, had moved forward. When the order reached them specifying the day's objectives, they realised that they had already arrived and, instead of continuing, halted and began entrenching.

As early as the 22nd, the Isonzo Army command had recognised the danger. Its XXIV Army Corps, facing our corps of the same number, was at the end of its strength and no longer capable of guaranteeing the front's inviolability. It was also extremely risky to plug the breach with the 73rd Division, the only reserve. If it were committed prematurely, no other reinforcements, still far away, could be counted upon for several days.

Many things could happen in several days. The Italians might overflow into the Chiapovano valley and from there strike the rear of Idria and San Gabriele. There was therefore no solution except a voluntary withdrawal intended to gain time until further reinforcements arrived. The moment was decisive; an instant of moral hesitation, one error, and everything would be lost.

Colonel Pitreich, head of the Operations Section, Chief of Staff General Le Beau and the Marshal himself searched the operational maps for the right inspiration. Amid clouds of smoke from the cigarettes he lit one after another, Pitreich consoled himself by imagining a counter-attack against the Italians from the Lom heights above Tolmino. These were illusions. The one certainty was that the order to withdraw could not be delayed much longer. Once set in motion, however, in what condition would the exhausted troops reach the Ternova plateau and the Idria mountains?

They would have to march eastwards to the edge of the Bainsizza plateau, plunge into the Chiapovano valley, and climb its steep side in the hope of restoring, twenty kilometres east of the Isonzo, a situation similar to the one existing along the river before May. How many men, how much matériel and how many guns would be lost in this movement? And what if the Italians renewed their attack vigorously against the withdrawing troops?

During the night of 22-23 the news continued to worsen, and at nine the following morning the order was issued, to take effect during the night of 23-24: withdrawal beyond the Chiapovano valley, while holding firm on the Lom heights and San Gabriele. Monte Santo, hitherto fiercely and successfully defended, was included in the evacuation.

On this occasion, however, the professional training of the Austrian military caste bore fruit, and the autonomy of decision permitted to field commanders completed the advantage. Field Marshal Goiginger, commander of the 73rd Division and celebrated defender of Ortigara, had preceded his troops to the firing line by four days in order to assess the situation. His diagnosis was not as catastrophic as that of Isonzo Army Command.

Was it certain that the Italian artillery would be able to protect the advancing infantry? Had the Italians anticipated and arranged the movement of medium and heavy guns to the left bank of the Isonzo? Even if they had, would the wretched road network of the Bainsizza permit it? If all this had not been organised beforehand, one had merely to take a compass, draw upon the map a circle with a radius of ten kilometres centred upon Canale, and move outside it, beyond the curtain of fire which the imposing Italian deployment had so far created in front of its troops. Once they had pierced the protective curtain, their numerical superiority would become superfluous, while the small but highly trained Austrian artillery would be exploited to the full.

Goiginger telephoned in these terms at eleven on the morning of the 23rd. His advice, as simple as Columbus's egg although risky, was accepted immediately: the Austro-Hungarian army would test the possibility of a delaying defence along the meridian dividing the Bainsizza plateau in two. Feverish telephone consultations crossed between Isonzo Army Command and the XV and XXIV Army Corps commands involved in the retreat, in order to modify the orders. The Italians were thus conceded an advance ten kilometres deep, and that far - but no farther - they advanced.

From the beginning of the battle, the Italian II Corps had met hard resistance and suffered grave losses. Its left-hand division, the 3rd, linked with XXIV Corps, was nevertheless able to advance slowly and place the defenders of Kobilek in difficulty. The Austrian defensive tactics were tenacious and agile at the same time, exploiting to the utmost the delaying possibilities of machine-gun nests.

In his booklet Kobilek, Ardengo Soffici describes an example. On the morning of the 19th, an entire battalion of the 127th Infantry had been stopped by a machine gun near the houses of Rutarsce. The

weapon stood in a cavern, into whose depths it was withdrawn while our artillery fired. With trained infantry and artillery, this was a case for attacking beneath the arc of the shells' trajectory. Instead, the battalion was placed under cover while trench mortars and medium-calibre guns went into action:

> For several hours there was a howling and rolling of projectiles through the sky, a thunder of explosions followed by the crash of falling stones, everything so terrifying that, when it ended, none of us doubted that not only the machine gun, but the cavern and the very place where it stood had been annihilated and reduced to dust.
>
> With this conviction we were led back to the morning's position and prepared once more for the attack. But the enemy had only to notice our intention for the machine gun, more alive than before, to resume its work.

The day was lost. Towards evening, after considering the matter, the battalion officers decided that perhaps a trench-mortar section brought into the line during the night would overcome the phantom machine gun. The following morning, when fire resumed, there were not one but three machine guns. Supporting one another, they laid low anyone daring to advance towards the wire, which remained largely intact. The “terrifying” hammering by our guns continued until ten o'clock:

> When it ceased and we believed that this time not even a splinter of the machine gun could remain: ta-ta-ta-ta, the machine gun was still in place as though nothing had happened.
>
> The exasperation aroused in all of us, officers and men, by the incomprehensible indestructibility of a machine which a single shell can smash to fragments was even beginning to assume a comic character...
>
> Our artillery continued repeatedly for hours to strike the rock against which the machine gun lay flattened. At every pause in the bombardment, the companies in the line attempted to advance; the intact machine gun resumed its fire.

Throughout the 20th the soldiers, immobilised behind improvised cover, smoked and talked while awaiting orders, on empty stomachs because the Austrian interdiction fire had prevented the ration parties from arriving. The 21st began in the same way:

> As on the day before, at every pause in the bombardment we believed that we were about to go forward to the assault; but, as on the day before, the machine gun did not fall silent... Several hours later, when no one expected it any longer, we were informed that the machine gun had been destroyed... Precisely what had happened, and by what miracle it had been possible in so short a time to do what had proved impossible in two days, we never succeeded in establishing clearly.
>
> We vaguely learned that a company of the battalion in front had managed by a sudden raid to seize a kind of fort or redoubt. A little mountain gun was immediately brought up, and with dense, well-aimed fire it quickly annihilated the cavern, the machine gunner and the machine gun...

Before dying, that machine gunner could boast that with one weapon he had halted a thousand men. Its technical qualities are illustrated by the fact that in all that time it had never jammed. This and other machine-gun nests were manned by men described on posters in Italian cities and in cinemas as “the cowardly and treacherous enemy”, but who prompted a different reflection in Colonel Carlo Romano, commander of an artillery group in II Corps:

> In those troglodytes' caverns there must be human beings lying in wait, their eyes fixed upon the machine-gun sights, with very steady hearts: heroes certainly devoted to death.

Such was the resistance the Austrians offered between the Rohot valley and Monte Santo. They prevented the Italians from making significant progress and inflicted exceedingly bloody losses,

amounting to several thousand men, more severe than elsewhere along the slopes of Monte Santo, which was defended with the customary determination.

Once XXIV Corps had overcome all the Austrian defensive lines, however, II Corps too was released. Beginning with its left wing, it opened out like a fan, pivoting upon Monte Santo, which a telephone interception on the evening of the 23rd indicated was about to be evacuated. News that Monte Santo had been occupied at about eleven by the Forlì Brigade, which planted its tattered and bloodstained colours there, reached General Capello while he was giving new instructions to his corps commanders. At the announcement, the meeting dissolved in euphoria and each man was sent back to his battle station.

Men now looked far beyond the Chiapovano depression towards the forests of Ternova and Piro, crossed eighteen centuries earlier by the Roman armies of the Emperor Maximinus Thrax.

Throughout the 24th and 25th, the infantry of the Second Army enjoyed the pleasure of mobile warfare, a pleasure spoiled by infernal thirst, unbearable heat and visions of death and destruction. Wherever the Italian artillery had struck home, the slaughter had been horrible and even veterans could not endure the sight: trenches filled with bodies, collapsed caverns sealing the fate of entire companies, abandoned weapons, houses and huts torn open - all the signs of an army defeated and driven back.

On 25 August, for the first time, the communiqué of the Supreme Command, hitherto silent about events on the Bainsizza - to General Caviglia's resentment, because the work of XXIV Corps had never been mentioned, an omission which, he said, “might prove many things known to me” - officially announced:

> Since yesterday the tricolour has flown upon the summit of Monte Santo. The brave troops of the Second Army, having broken through the defensive lines at several points during the past days, are pressing the enemy, who is withdrawing while defending the harsh ground step by step...

The communiqué of the 26th stated:

> The battle is beginning to reveal the grandeur of its outlines...

The only worrying note in the same communiqué was its conclusion:

> The enormous difficulty of supplying our troops through a roadless area is being partly overcome thanks to the large food depots abandoned by the enemy during his retreat.

The difficulty of supply, together with the end of heavy-artillery support, was in fact compromising the battle's outcome.

On 26 August the advanced troops felt the enemy defence stiffen and discovered a series of hurried fortifications to which the Austrians clung desperately. Although the Italian army arched between the Lom heights above Tolmino and San Gabriele, it failed to overwhelm them.

Our press did its best not to clarify the limits of our success or the reasons why victory had not been achieved. The reverse suffered by XXVII Corps was described as a trap laid for the Austrians by an astute mind, resembling the mind which, in The Betrothed, the mayor attributed to the Count-Duke, “who... when he points to the right, one may be sure that he will strike to the left” [19]. Arnaldo Fraccaroli wrote on 28 August:

> Having climbed in the north from the precipices of the Isonzo, the grey-green flood had channelled itself into the Avscek valley, captured it and advanced through it... Italian shells struck the areas of Leupa and Kal. It was therefore towards that region that the offensive was directed; that was the region that had to be defended most strongly. Instead, in a sudden movement, the grey-green flood poured to the right, towards the west and south. It invaded the Vrh plateau, submerged Jelenik, and descended with the violence of an overflow...

For a few days, and only a few, the illusion was encouraged that the Battle of the Bainsizza had been a decisive victory. While Nino Oxilia, the famous author of Addio, giovinezza!, was mourned after sacrificing his own youth on the slopes of Monte Santo during the first day of battle, the name of the mountain was again glorified by art when the newspapers announced: “Maestro Toscanini decorated on the field.”

On the evening of 26 August, while climbing the steep slopes of Monte Santo, the world's most celebrated conductor encountered a divisional band crouching as best it could beside the road under artillery fire. Toscanini took the initiative of assuming command and at ten o'clock that night caused the well-directed notes of the Royal March and Mameli's hymn to echo from the captured summit. The unmistakably Italian music poured towards the Ternova forest, awakening the Austrians' attention and annoyance, and they opened fire. It is not known whether Toscanini succeeded in procuring several additional deaths for the Italian army. His feat earned him a Silver Medal, which General Capello took pleasure in pinning personally upon his breast on 31 August 1917.

Within a few days several hundred thousand men had been transferred to the left bank of the Isonzo and had begun, with varying success, to climb the rocky steps of the plateau. At this point the inadequacy of the logistical organisation became apparent: it had been prepared for the first step, but the subsequent advance had been left to chance. The movement was complicated and burdened by the need to relieve front-line troops already eaten away by battle losses and replace them with reserves which in many cases could not arrive because the road was blocked.

The situation was particularly intricate in the XXVII Corps sector, where misfortune, difficult terrain and incapacity of command had created a precarious situation from the beginning. General Badoglio, having assumed command after General Vanzo's lightning dismissal, informed the army commander that “movement in the rear areas must be disciplined, otherwise passage will become impossible... Movements are long and delicate since everything is carried out along a single road.” On that same day, a gigantic traffic jam of motor lorries developed just beyond Kambresco and blocked the approach of the Potenza Brigade for many hours.

Moreover, while the Austrians had escaped Italian pressure by withdrawing exactly beyond the limit of the curtain of fire, the Italian advance now took place beneath Austrian artillery fire. There was no remedy except to improvise the movement of medium- and heavy-calibre artillery together with their cumbersome ammunition parks. General Capello issued instructions to bring the guns forward as early as 25 August:

> A suitable number of heavy field and siege batteries is to be advanced in support of the infantry which is about to reach the western edge of the Chiapovano valley and aims to cross it, following the principle of an advance by echelons... An attempt is to be made to bring several mountain guns with abundant ammunition as far forward as possible in the direction of Ravnica, in order to act against the rear of San Gabriele and San Daniele. To exercise a similar action, several heavy field guns are to be pushed towards Gargaro and Britof...

With more than three thousand guns available, it was nevertheless disappointing to be reduced to scraping together “several pieces”. Naturally, the orders to bring the artillery forward - easy to issue - overlapped with orders to hurry, advance and withdraw the exhausted brigades. The result was that in the Iudrio valley and around Globocak the congestion became simply terrifying. Artillery trains, marching infantry, supply columns and lines of motor lorries tangled together like a series of knots tied at random. The very abundance of vehicles became an impediment because of the need to supply them with fuel.

In the II Corps sector, the road leading from Plava towards the Vodice ridge was roughly restored, but according to Baj-Macario's description it was an entirely inadequate expedient:

> On 27 August the confusion along that single road was unbelievable. Movement takes place in short bounds separated by interminable halts. Heaven help us if the enemy bombs from the air or subjects the road to intense fire!
>
> The enemy does, however, fire persistently upon the Vodice saddle, an obligatory passage. There the General [Montuori] stands undaunted and upright among the boulders, encouraging everyone by his example and exhorting them in harsh, hoarse tones.
>
> A terrifying scene occurs: an artillery limber is struck squarely and explodes with a tremendous crash, hurling around fragments and the bleeding pieces of the gunners and mangled horses.
>
> When darkness falls, the batteries continue along the stony, devastated tracks of Kobilek. The night is cold and moonless. The horses stumble, rear in terror and utter long neighs; the heavy field guns repeatedly have to be hauled by hand; several pieces overturn, and the men, overcome by sleep and exhaustion, threaten to collapse at every moment...

Orders had meanwhile been issued for the mobile troops to “hold themselves ready”. The 2nd Division and V Cavalry Brigade, together with four cyclist Bersaglieri battalions equipped with extremely hard folding bicycles on solid tyres, were to prepare to pursue the enemy. Confidence in the overwhelming action of Hannibalic cavalry in 1917 may appear surprising, but this was still the prevailing doctrine and no one knew what to replace it with.

The cavalry squadrons and cyclists therefore assembled in the Isonzo valley. Another aspect of the supply crisis then became apparent: where could the horses be watered? Not a drop of water could be found upon the plateau in that season. After drinking for the last time in the Isonzo, the horses would have to reach the Chiapovano valley in a single stage. Before unleashing the mobile troops, it was therefore necessary to be certain they could reach it. But the valley was not yet in Italian hands and never became so. Horses, riders and cyclists waited anxiously for several days for the order to go, which never came. Two squadrons which attempted to enter the Chiapovano valley through the Gargaro basin were repulsed.

Men were not treated with the same consideration as horses. It was known that horses, being genuine animals, refused to gallop unless properly cared for. Men, by contrast, were known to be capable of managing somehow. Unfortunately, soldiers could march and fight while enduring hunger and sleep, but could not do without water without falling within a few hours into a state of madness. The same logistical “inconvenience” had surprised the British during the Dardanelles landing in 1915, when many soldiers, after hours of fighting, abandoned their weapons and ran towards the beach groaning with thirst.

Thirst had placed the advance of XXIV Corps in crisis from its very first days. At 3:40 p.m. on 21 August General Boriani, commander of V Bersaglieri Brigade, sent the following message to his divisional commander, General Fara:

> I implore you to find a solution to the problem [of water] and have this indispensable element brought as far as Vrh along the Bodrez-Vrh mule track, if possible by mules. Troops with morale as high as this, if they receive water today, will be capable of accomplishing any task... Unfortunately I have many cases of men fainting from thirst. I cannot assist them, and fear that this may affect their aggressive spirit.

Thirst continued to torment V Brigade during the following days. According to Senator Albertini, who based himself upon the testimony of his brother Antonio, a Bersaglieri captain in the brigade, it was in fact the principal cause of the halt in the Italian offensive:

> The diary records that V Brigade, after crossing the Isonzo, occupied the Semmer-Fratta line, overcoming resistance that was not very serious. It halted there for a day and then resumed its advance, crossing the Vrh basin and progressing six or seven kilometres while opposed only slightly by enemy rearguard groups. Divisional headquarters refused to believe the report of so great an advance, and a squadron of our aircraft, not imagining that Italians had already reached that line, bombed the brigade.
>
> The brigade could perfectly well have continued its advance had its strength not been subjected to the most terrible trial, not by the enemy but by the absolute lack of water, made still more unbearable by the atrocious heat. It was relieved by another infantry brigade. Thirst, however, checked the impetus of the entire operation and wore out beyond measure troops which otherwise would have been capable of throwing themselves against the new Austrian deployment before it had consolidated.

Ardengo Soffici too suffered the torment of thirst:

> I was almost dead with exhaustion. Thirst, more terrible than ever, had made me almost mad. My mouth felt like a dried sponge; the veins in my neck and forehead hammered, swollen like ropes...

When he reached the newly captured summit of Kobilek:

> I saw a magnificent spectacle that will remain present in my memory for ever... All the soldiers who had arrived up there had climbed onto every projection, where they remained perched, leaning against the curved wall, one pressed against another and one above another, in their thousands, evoking the image of a flock of vultures resting after some fantastic flight.
>
> And the whole multitude shouted, repeating incessantly a single word:
>
> "Water! Water! Water!"

It is not surprising that burning thirst drove many units to reckless acts. The 852nd Machine-Gun Company of the Potenza Brigade, exhausted by terrible thirst, replaced the water in the machine-gun cooling cans with water from a muddy pool and drank the original supply. Within a few days, signs of an intestinal infection appeared and put the entire company out of action. The commander of a trench-mortar battery suffered worse:

> During those days three of my men died after drinking water from the radiator of a tractor abandoned by the enemy.
>
> I had the three dead men buried in that miserable camp and went to the headquarters of an infantry regiment to explain our situation. I presented myself to the colonel. I begged and implored him to take us onto the strength of his regiment while I sought orders from divisional headquarters. He dismissed me with these words: "Do you want me to get a dressing-down? You command the battery; manage for yourself!"
>
> Several hours later I returned to the doline where my men were and found them arranged in a semicircle. I approached, expecting to find someone dead or wounded, and this sad spectacle met my eyes. The soldiers, foam at their mouths, stood around a wooden tub filled with gravel. They had urinated into it and were waiting for the urine to filter through so that they could drink it...
>
> "God help anyone who drinks!" I shouted, drawing my revolver from its holster. They collapsed disappointed upon the ground. I placed two tubes of blasting gelatin with a fuse in the tub and blew

it up.

> We struck the tents and set out for the Isonzo, which we reached the next day at the cost of infinite hardship. I had assumed the terrible responsibility of abandoning the front line with my few survivors. On the other hand, we would all have died of thirst or committed some act of madness.

The wounded on the battlefield, Italian and Austrian, suffered an even worse fate. This was especially true of the Austrian wounded who could not be transported and were left behind by the retreating troops in the hope that Italian hospitals would care for them. Many hours often passed between their abandonment and our arrival. The wounded spent them screaming and twisting beneath the burning sun. Little by little the screams became groans and finally whimpers, until no breath came from their dried, swollen mouths and their eyes took on the glassy appearance of death.

In the other sectors of the Second Army and along the Third Army front, the August offensive resulted in the customary slaughter.

Among the corps assigned a demonstrative task was IV Corps, under Cavalocchi, deployed from Rombon to Tolmino. It was to engage the enemy on Sleme and Mrzli, positions that had already proved themselves greedy drinkers of blood. The main weight of the attack fell upon the Caltanissetta Brigade, the 147th and 148th Infantry Regiments, while other battalions were to attempt the capture of Monte Rosso with the assistance of a many-branched mine gallery secretly excavated beneath the Austrian trenches. The Austrians, however, had equally secretly reached some of its branches and removed the explosives. When the mine failed to explode, the assault failed.

As for the Caltanissetta Brigade, Colonel Ferretti, commander of the 147th Infantry, had declared himself opposed to the operation, which in his opinion had no prospect of success. Papa Ferretti, as the soldiers called him, had managed within a few months of his arrival to eliminate the makeshift shelters and rotting huts in which the troops had until then been quartered, replacing them with more comfortable and secure caves. But his vice of speaking plainly earned him, more solito, the torpedo. "He does not know how to get along," was the High Command's comment. Although decorated with two Silver Medals, he was sent to count sacks of sugar at Pontelagoscuro.

His replacement, who arrived a few days before the offensive, is described as follows by Lieutenant Mario Muccini of the 147th Infantry:

> The new regimental commander... assembled us all at Le Roccette and gave officers whom he did not know instructions for an attack upon positions he had never seen.
>
> He is Piedmontese and speaks slowly in a pale, drawling voice, as though the matter concerned repainting the beds in the barracks.

The bombardment of the Austrian positions, which began here as elsewhere on the afternoon of 17 August, ended at dawn on the 19th, though not without drawing immediate enemy retaliation. In Muccini's description:

> At dawn Le Roccette is a blazing furnace. The roar of the heavy artillery shakes earth and sky. Explosions and geysers of earth and stones rise into the air; the entire little valley is ploughed up and overturned, and the last bushes and mutilated trees are uprooted and scattered far away.
>
> The position changes its face, the landscape is deformed; we are all terrified, bewildered, lost, many of us outside the inadequate caves, stunned, brutalised and paralysed, with every faculty cancelled. The dressing station is already overflowing with wounded and dying men. Before going into the attack, the companies have lost one third of their strength.

This last "detail" is also recorded in the official Italian history, according to which the enemy artillery "concentrated upon our front-line works on Mrzli, causing material damage and inflicting losses upon the troops ready for the attack". Yet in this sector more than four hundred Italian guns were in action against fewer than one hundred Austro-Hungarian pieces.

Muccini's account continues:

> Great skeins of black smoke. A blast of burning air strikes us. Cries of pain. There is a sickening stench of burnt flesh, benzol and burning clothing. Through the thinning smoke I see two men running along the Austrian trench with their clothes in flames.
>
> The major is wounded. There, they are carrying him down. His foot is shattered.
>
> "Major, sir..."
>
> "It is nothing, it is nothing. Captain Filograsso is up there."
>
> He is deathly pale. We say goodbye to one another.
>
> The battalion cannot advance, packed inside the trench. The machine guns sweep their deadly bursts across the exits and block them. The soldiers cannot get out.
>
> "Forward, forward, lads! We shall all die here..."
>
> The whistle! Filograsso blows it. Fortunately, the infernal uproar covers its grotesque sound. A corporal of the Ninth Company beside me vomits blood and gasps. Panci too is dead, at the entrance to the communication trench.
>
> I too shout:
>
> "Forward!"
>
> ...
>
> Point 1370. A shapeless heap of ruins. Inside a burnt and wrecked shelter, two enormous black cocoons, still smoking, of charred flesh.
>
> We stop. Fire strikes us from the flank. On the left our men are withdrawing. Around us there is slaughter and extermination...
>
> ...
>
> It is night. In the Dog Cave. The operation has failed. Everyone has returned to the starting trenches, but the remnants of the battalion expect at any moment to receive orders to attack again.
>
> The artillery is firing furiously. The Bersaglieri are at Le Roccette. Poor battalion!...
>
> ...
>
> At the far end there is a dying Austrian, moaning and pleading.
>
> "Oh, mein Got!"
>
> He asks for a drink, but no one has a mouthful of water with which to relieve his thirst.

> Anastasi relates indignantly that today, when he went down to regimental headquarters, he saw rows of wounded men before the dressing station, and wounded everywhere who could not be treated. Many of them died in despair, screaming and still mad with anguish and terror.
>
> The operation has been postponed...

This was the epilogue of the action attempted by the Caltanissetta and Alessandria Brigades. Thirty-seven years later the few survivors must have enjoyed the satisfaction of reading in the official history that:

> Taken as a whole, the activity displayed by IV Army Corps, although it did not attain the territorial objectives assigned and despite the heavy tribute of blood paid by the 46th Division, satisfactorily fulfilled its task within the general framework of the Army's operation by successfully holding the opposing enemy forces in place...

At the time, the satisfaction can hardly have been so great, because Muccini's battalion was disbanded as punishment and reconstructed with replacements, while the survivors were divided among the other companies of the regiment.

IV Army Corps therefore suspended every offensive operation. On 22 August, meeting Cavaciocchi at Vipulzano, Capello ordered him to remain ready in force while awaiting a breakthrough by XXVII Corps towards the Lom positions and an attack upon Tolmino by the 19th Division. Since this did not occur, the employment of IV Corps remained conditional upon it. The Caltanissetta Brigade, withdrawn from the line for ten days after losing half its strength, was rebuilt with replacement battalions. Cavaciocchi reviewed it on 31 August, but found it, unsurprisingly, rusty and not yet welded together.

An even worse fate befell the right wing of the Second Army, VI and VIII Corps, and the left wing of the Third Army, XI Corps. Along those fifteen kilometres of front, monotonous and insane frontal attacks followed one another for several days without the satisfaction of even the smallest advance.

The San Marco sector had been the scene of bloody attritional fighting even during the period when relative calm prevailed elsewhere. On the morning of 19 August, with San Marco at the centre, eight divisions attacked between San Gabriele and Faiti, supported by 1,200 guns and 700 trench mortars employed, according to Ugo Ojetti, who was present, "in a bestial manner". The objectives were always the same: Veliki Hrib, Grazigna, Point 126, Belpoggio, Dosso del Palo, San Marco, Casa Diruta, Orzeni, Spacapani and Point 464 on Faiti. The Austrians answered the hurricane of fire with which the Italian guns pounded the area with stubborn fury.

The Emilia and Gaeta Brigades of the 24th Division advanced towards the ruins of Grazigna. The history of the Italian brigades says that they "were subjected to deadly fire and dispersed". During the afternoon they returned to a second terrible assault and were again repulsed. The task of storming the fortifications of San Marco was instead given to the 48th Division, which, as in May, was decimated. By evening the Lambro Brigade had succeeded here and there in advancing three hundred metres.

A soldier from Cremona left this testimony of sunset on 19 August beneath San Marco:

> The incendiary shells produced enormous fires. Between Villa Roosmaldek and Villa Coronini there was a single sheet of flame. We had to run along that stretch of road, about a kilometre long and lit throughout by the blaze, carrying the cooking pots on our shoulders [20], otherwise they would have spotted us. Meanwhile columns of stretchers went past. I remember one stretcher-bearer falling, and the body on his stretcher rolling directly onto a piece of burning beam. I heard no moan: it was a corpse... In the communication trenches I stepped upon soldiers and apologised to them, thinking they were asleep. They did not answer: they were dead. One saw nothing but dead men. You should

> have seen the terrible effect of the trench mortars in the Austrian trenches. Everything flew into the air: trees, earth and wire, while fragments of flesh fell upon our lines!

A company of Black Flames from the 1st Assault Unit achieved an ephemeral success at Belpoggio.

Farther south, in the Raccogliano bend and towards the Vipacco, the Rovigo and Lecce Brigades bled themselves white. Towards evening the battalions of the Rovigo Brigade, after advancing a few hundred metres, "shaken and decimated", in the words of the official history, "were ordered back into the starting trenches". General Rocca, the divisional commander, impressed by the failure, sent an officer to that stretch of trench near the ill-famed Point 126 [21], and learned that only two gaps had been opened in the wire ahead, through which the men had to pass in single file.

The Tevere Brigade collided with Point 363 on Faiti. In II/216th, all the company commanders and the battalion commander were killed or wounded within a short time. The 1st Battalion was sent to support it because, according to General Carbone's version, the troops were "wavering"; but its commander too was wounded and the entire regiment had to withdraw. The 215th, in turn, reached the wire of the enemy's first line and remained there under violent machine-gun fire, suffering heavy losses.

The brigade commander ordered the general attack to be resumed at 1:30 p.m. The 215th's second attempt provoked an exceedingly violent Austrian reaction, whose murderous fire caused a new slaughter among the attackers and prevented the last wave from leaving its trenches. At 2:40 p.m. two companies made one final futile effort. The 216th tried three times during the afternoon; for a moment one detachment set foot upon Point 363, from which it was immediately thrown back.

That same evening the Piacenza Brigade relieved the Tevere positions. The 39th Honved Regiment, the same unit that had attacked it on 3 and 4 June, had fought against the Tevere. The Austrians lost 1,200 of the regiment's 1,900 men. The official Austrian report describes the fighting in these terms:

> ... The Italians attacked with the courage of desperation. Their effort to shake the 48th Division at Castagnevizza once and for all, and thereby reach the rear of Hermada, was understandable...
>
> Their masses advanced in deep and strongly echeloned formations. Although the first waves were literally mown down, the following waves finally succeeded in setting foot in the first line; but the gallant 39th Regiment soon eliminated this penetration... Despite this failure, in the evening the Italians attacked again along the whole front of the 17th Division, and savage fighting developed at several points...

During the following days VI, VIII and XI Army Corps immolated themselves in further useless assaults. Point 363 on Faiti was again occupied and again lost by the Piacenza Brigade, which, exhausted, had to be replaced by the Tevere, the brigade it had relieved only two days earlier. Divisional and brigade commands exchanged telephone conversations of the following kind:

- We must go forward.
- It is impossible! The battalions have been decimated and exhausted by several days of fighting.
- Try again.
- Listen, I shall go in person. I can do no more.

The struggle weakened as the reserves grew thinner, until the assault upon San Gabriele matured. For another month it represented a formidable drain upon strength. Between 19 August and the end of the month the three corps lost almost 40,000 men: 40,000 men without a history.

Most atrocious of all, however, was the final Karst offensive, supported by a mass of guns approximately one hundred pieces and two hundred trench mortars greater than that employed in May. Ammunition was also more abundant, since each piece had more than one thousand rounds. Because it

had also been decided to reduce the effective duration of the bombardment to twenty-four hours, the density of fire was tripled. Skill in the employment of the artillery had not improved, however. On this occasion too we were greatly outclassed by the Austrians, although they possessed only one gun for every three of ours.

During the days preceding the offensive, an endless procession of soldiers from every branch marched along the Doberdò valley, crowding the roads and packing into the caves. The villages of huts scattered over the eastern slopes of the valley swarmed with young men in grey-green. Batteries stood everywhere, deployed carelessly without protection or camouflage, one beside another and one behind another in such numbers that no more would fit: a spectacle of strength and abundance of means.

On the 17th, as on the Middle Isonzo, intermittent fire began against previously registered targets. The true preparatory bombardment developed during the 18th. It was conducted intermittently in four-hour periods, separated by pauses devoted to observing its effects. The Austrian artillery exploited these pauses to fire upon the front-line doline and the positions of the supports.

On the morning of the 18th the renewal of fire was opened by the field artillery of the 61st Division, joined by 58- and 240-millimetre trench mortars. The soldiers' highly experienced ears detected even the slight differences among the various types of artillery, between the dry cracks of flat-trajectory guns and the rounded thuds of high-angle weapons:

- That shriek is a 75.
- Listen to the howl of the 305.
- From the way it snores, that is a 149.
- Lads, learn to recognise the whistle of the 152s.

Within a few minutes the 105s of the 1st Heavy Field Regiment went into action from Opacchiasella; from Pietrarossa, Lukatic and Novivas came two batteries of 149s, the guns of the 37th Field Regiment and XVI Pack Artillery Group. XII Siege Group, equipped with British howitzers, fired from Doberdò, Novivas and Devetaki together with XXIX and LI Groups, which had emplaced several 305s at Boneti. Selo, Stari Lovka and Castagnevizza were under the fire of monstrous French 380-millimetre batteries positioned at Seltz and Monfalcone.

One of these pieces, served by gigantic chocolate-coloured Senegalese particularly fond of eating the grease from cart wheels, registered upon Trieste and, after some uncertainty, succeeded in striking the buildings near Piazza dell'Unità.

Tethered balloons swayed slowly in the sky, their crews transmitting data to artillery batteries that gradually entered action. At nine o'clock several dozen Capronis and fighters raced towards the Austrian rear areas to carry there what limited destruction they could. A roar: an Austrian ammunition depot near Versic had exploded. Shortly afterwards enemy shells struck the ammunition reserve of a trench-mortar battery in the Mazzini dolina, slaughtering an infantry battalion. In a great pit excavated in the red earth, amid a charnel heap of perhaps forty soldiers, lay the lifeless commander who had received his promotion the day before.

The day was beautiful, but the sun was veiled by haze and hung within an aura of sinister light. In the oppressive heat the flat, undulating arc of the Karst horizon vanished behind an ashen curtain. The ridges of Tersteli and Hermada appeared and disappeared.

The artillery fire was "fairly good". On the positions held by the Grenadiers, however, several trench-mortar salvoes fell between the first and second Italian lines. At that moment a telephone message from General Diaz, commander of XXIII Army Corps, was distributed to the front-line units: "Stragglers are

to be dealt with with the utmost vigour and severity." Surveillance was to be increased over laggards, stretcher-bearers and lightly wounded men, who after treatment had to be sent back into battle according to the relatively new theory that military doctors must employ military methods of treatment.

Trusted and heavily armed personnel were responsible for this surveillance: carabinieri, machine-gunners and even light artillery. Clemency towards the "cowardly" was a crime; they deserved to be shot.

The more seriously wounded were reassured by the wounded soldier's decalogue, which recommended among other things: "If you have a wound in the abdomen, take care not to drink and, above all, not to eat." For a man with a buttonhole where his navel had been, the principal enemy was appetite.

Lieutenant Angelo Beccaria relates:

> I stop at the low wall of the communication trench to admire Hermada in flames... The summit and flanks of the massif, and the buttress of hills crowded before it, blaze without respite with steaming explosions within a delicate veil of mist which the wind drives and disperses from time to time. Here and there the smoke lingers: the scrub is burning.

The Austrian reaction was miraculous in its speed and accuracy. The Catanzaro communication trench was severely damaged; Komarie and Point 219 were heavily pounded; the Bari Brigade's telephone links were broken, while those of the Grenadiers were severed seven times and repaired seven times.

Towards evening the summary reports reached Army headquarters, all of them highly discouraging. Farther north VIII and XI Army Corps reported considerable, although not continuous, damage. To the right of Castagnevizza, the results were described as "poor", and the 13th Infantry reported only a few narrow gaps in the wire. Given the meagre results of the destructive fire, it was suspected that the Austrian machine-gun line remained almost intact.

Yet an "extremely urgent, most confidential, personal and secret" despatch arriving during the night confirmed earlier information. K-hour was fixed, regardless of the effects of the fire, for 5:33 a.m. on 19 August - or rather, five barrels and thirty-three small barrels, in order to make the enemy's possible work of interception and decryption more complicated, on the assumption that he was completely idiotic. During the night gas shells were fired; mist and acrid odours stagnated in the air.

Our infantry units had suffered appreciable damage from the Austrian fire, which continued with great violence throughout the night, and from short Italian rounds. The Grenadier Brigade had suffered more than two hundred casualties; the Bari Brigade, more fortunate, only about twenty. General Bava, commander of the Novara Brigade, had been seriously wounded by a heavy-calibre shell that slaughtered his headquarters.

Lieutenant Stanghellini, still with the Pinerolo Brigade, again had the opportunity to observe the lack of accuracy in the Italian fire:

> Brigadier Perris [the brigade commander] anxiously watched the poor distribution of shells upon the heights the Pinerolo was to storm. Beside him, with Captain De Sanctis of the 14th Division, Lieutenant Mallone and Captain Venturi, I watched from the communication trench leading from the Cesana to the Pozzo dolina the terrifying spread of the bombardment from Faiti to Hermada.
>
> The setting sun stained the observers' faces with blood, giving their features the colour, sharpness and relief of tragic expectation.
>
> "Captain, send a telephone message to the division stating that the heights are being poorly engaged and that fire upon the enemy front line must be intensified." The brigadier's lips trembled with indignation amid the growing storm.

Another officer wrote:

> The enemy is pounding our positions without respite and our troops are being decimated before leaving for the assault. Ammunition depots are exploding and water tanks are being destroyed. Dead and wounded men are everywhere: in the doline, communication trenches and shelters.

The old brigades returned to bleed themselves dry. What had been reshuffled was the numbering of army corps and divisions, but the infantry brigades were more or less the same units that had tasted the bitterness of May. Even their starting positions were almost identical.

Castagnevizza remained in Austrian hands, while "the station" was occupied by the Italians. "The station" was a euphemism: no one would have noticed that a railway station had once existed there except for several twisted rails rising towards the sky like sticks more resistant than the rest. Castagnevizza itself had become a small mound of earth, a mixture of ruins and decomposed corpses, from which grotesquely projected a chest of drawers here, a table leg there or a chamber pot.

Then there was the southern pillar of the Karst front: impregnable Hermada. The Duke of Aosta had made its capture a point of personal honour, and on 6 August had asked Cadorna for authority to attack the fortress at any cost, regardless of the results achieved elsewhere.

In the summer of 1917 Hermada was the closest possible approximation to hell within hell, and its inhabitants were living damned souls. When Austro-Hungarian units transferred from other fronts opened the sealed orders stating their new destination on the Karst - Point 323 - their hearts sank. There was only one Point 323 on the Karst, and that was Hermada: a burnt and scorched hill, struck from every side by shells of every calibre; a gigantic termite mound in which tens of thousands of soldiers nested with their machine guns and batteries of every kind.

The mountain was excavated and perforated in every direction by trenches, galleries and caves. Along a single kilometre of front there were thirty kilometres of communication trenches. The entire slope facing the Iamiano valley was pierced by eye-like openings cut into the rock, in each of which a weapon had been emplaced.

The mountain seemed to have become the symbol of old Austria's resistance. For the sake of that symbol, the defenders were subjected to hallucinatory trials. The reverberation of heavy-calibre shells from the monitors concealed near Punta Sdobba was unbearable. The whole battered and trembling mountain seemed a gigantic beast upon which clouds of pygmies were concentrating their arrows. Its skin of friable Karst rock crumbled into a thousand fragments.

Those hidden in the deep caves felt relatively safe, but the men assigned to hold the many exposed trench lines on the mountain's flank endured, for as long as it lasted, a martyrdom borne with inexplicable stoicism. "The phenomenon of obedience is truly extraordinary," observed an Austrian battery lieutenant. "The soldier whose turn it is rises, takes his rifle and goes outside in his turn with a naturalness bordering upon madness."

This was Hermada in 1917, scourged by the burning sun, surrounded by haze nesting upon its summit, and besieged by the disgusting stench from thousands of corpses. Almost all were Italian dead: the remnants of the most advanced thrusts of the Tenth Battle of the Isonzo. Representatives of about thirty regiments lay there, reduced to whitening skeletons, swollen monsters or heaps of torn uniforms, bones and worms.

The Austrian trenches had been excavated among these dead, among this organic material. Quicklime and formalin were thrown down, and flamethrowers burned what little flesh remained; yet the

nauseating odour of decomposing matter did not vanish. The air was always saturated with it, and it entered the throat, giving an unpleasant sweetish taste to food that was already disgusting.

For the Italians, existence was only slightly worse than the life endured by the Austrians. For months they too had lived in cohabitation with the dead. The whole territory between Doberdò and the front lines was a gigantic sowing of corpses, among which the living man felt both pity and revulsion for his dead friend. Nor did they possess the vast belly of a colossus such as Hermada to protect them:

> Point 100! It was one immense cemetery! One could not repair a hut, reopen a trench or lift a stone without the sight of a fallen brother presenting itself.

Beneath its slopes, machine-gun second lieutenant Giovanni Cominetti, a literature student at the University of Turin, had improvised a lyric:

> ...
> Breaths of wind, the groaning of things,
> rise from the dolina "of the Dead".
> Crouched and reclining,
> those about to die dream in absorption.
> They dream of home, they dream of the farm,
> these sunburnt sons
> of unconquered Calabria; they dream
> of the forests of the Sila and the Busento.
> ...

Their faces and weary bodies seemed to ask God: Why, why?

Cominetti was only twenty-one and might therefore have had some chance of becoming a respectable poet had he not died shortly afterwards, faithful like all of them to the oath:

> Tonight, tomorrow and always
> we shall know how to water
> with our red blood
> the bald and arid height.

To Antonio Baldini, who continued to wage the war on behalf of L'Illustrazione Italiana, Hermada instead appeared a poetic prize, a coquettish and provocative woman:

> I am valuable because, besides being strong, I am beautiful.
>
> If you could see from up here the sea, the plain of Aquileia, the lagoon of Grado and the woods of Isola Morosini, and how much beauty they create, you would truly feel yourselves robbed of the flower of your conquest.
>
> There will be joy in singing from my eastern loggias the fertile hymn to labour in the fields and to the splendid calm of the seas.

And, as a kind of consolation prize:

> The first who fall among my good oaks will have the most delightful burial.

The distance between Cominetti's "bald and arid height" and Baldini's "delightful oak wood" was merely a question of viewpoint. Official Italian terminology, however, preferred Baldini's interpretation and renamed the mass of Hermada Querceto, the Oak Wood.

The "bald and arid height", unconquered Hermada, defended itself with the strength of desperation. It answered the furious cannonade with deadly and accurate counter-battery fire. At night its Cyclopean eye continued to watch the undulating and stony plateau:

> It illuminated wire entanglements, communication trenches and trenches, the ruins of houses or villages, festoons of matting masking the roads and, farther away, regiments marching in silence, columns of lorries deafening the abandoned villages with their clatter, and long lines of Sicilian carts drawn by donkeys or mules and driven by territorial troops.
>
> Its light cast sudden shadows that made the sentries start; it entered through loopholes to cast a rapid glance into trenches where soldiers kept watch; it traced the foliage of trees and pergolas upon houses in distant villages where other infantrymen slept troubled sleep.
>
> A kind of lighthouse whose beam embraced an area of storm - the Karst - and an area of calm, its rear lines.
>
> That beam had made patrols tremble, illuminated the foreheads of corpses and flashed over every helmet worn by the infantry of the Third Army.

The right wing of the Third Army, formed by XXV Corps under Ravazza, XXIII under Diaz and XIII under Sailer, deployed from Castagnevizza to the Adriatic, offered the customary terrible holocaust. In some sectors we advanced a few hundred metres and again reached the foot of Hermada, but the Austrian resistance line was not seriously damaged.

The operations can be rapidly summarised in their barren monotony. At 5:33 a.m. on the 19th, the three army corps advanced punctually. Before evening XXV Corps had advanced here and there by five hundred metres, XXIII had reached the approaches to Selo, and XIII had again moved beneath Medeazza and to the gates of San Giovanni.

Enemy resistance was extremely bitter. The first impressions transmitted by Arnaldo Fraccaroli to the Corriere della Sera during the night of the 19th reflected this sensation:

> ... It is all one nest of machine guns... the ground is disputed metre by metre... From above the Karst is almost invisible today. It is drowning in a kind of smoky swamp... There is no sign of troops in the open. They are all inside caves and shelters... The struggle is fierce... the day is extremely hard: impacts against the strongest lines, including shaft-like caves with revolving iron turrets for machine guns...

The few positive results had been paid for at the highest price: more than 15,000 men lost during the first hours.

The next day, while XXV Corps made no progress, XXIII succeeded in occupying Selo and advanced as far as the aqueduct east of the village, while XIII finally reoccupied Point 146 and Point 145 North. Fighting continued with the greatest violence during the following days without any gain of ground.

On the 21st the Valtellina Brigade, the 65th and 66th Infantry Regiments, sent to capture Stari Lovka, suffered a terrifying bloodletting. According to the official Italian report:

> ... Extremely violent artillery fire and the machine guns on Stari Lovka struck these units, causing such losses that their combined strength was reduced within a few minutes to approximately one third.
>
> Despite repeated assaults it was impossible to proceed beyond Selo. At 3 p.m. the attack was tried again, but on this occasion too enemy artillery and machine guns prevented any progress. Divisional headquarters [61st Division, XXIII Army Corps], on the basis of information confirming the enemy's lack of reserves and state of crisis, represented to brigade headquarters the necessity of advancing at any cost. At 7 p.m. the units, led by the regimental commanders, moved to the attack. The Arditi of the 65th and 66th, together with cavalry assault detachments operating with II/66th, bravely defied the continuous bursts of enemy fire and, advancing in successive waves, finally

> succeeded in penetrating the opposing first line. But accurately directed fire from enemy heavy calibres destroyed the occupied trench and buried the attackers; once again the survivors withdrew in good order in small groups, carrying the wounded back to the starting line before the ruins of Selo...

On the same day Fraccaroli transmitted:

> ... On the Karst the terrible struggle rages in an inferno of explosions, smoke and dust. Here the battle sinks underground like the Timavo, which appears and then disappears, not to emerge again until its mouth. Here the battle is fought in caves, communication trenches and shafts. No enemy combatant can be seen. Shells arrive and a machine gun fires, but the combatants must be sought underground. Our soldiers hurl themselves in waves against lines bearing no visible sign except loopholes. And they have broken through the first line...
>
> Hermada towers like granite with all the horror of its innumerable machine guns, but around it the Italians are crumbling the ground away...

"The mastiff," Fraccaroli nevertheless added, "still possessed all its teeth." Barzini, much more baroque than Fraccaroli, relieved him the following day:

> Never in the world has a human struggle raged that was broader, more intense, more tenacious or more magnificent than this battle of ours, which storms without respite, a roaring cataclysm, a deluge of fire and fury of multitudes, before which the formidable and terrifying barrier of enemy resistance slowly bends... The moment is passionate, filled with hope and anxiety, and every soul reaches towards the mysterious solemnity of the future with a throbbing and consuming, almost painful confidence...

It was not for nothing that many soldiers had expressed their intentions in the following form: "If I see Barzini, I shall shoot him."

Fraccaroli again on the 23rd:

> ... The infantry of XXIII Army Corps, having sprung forward, find themselves behind the first line. A brief lightning engagement with the defenders - brief because on attack days the Austrians withdraw into the caves and leave only small observation detachments in the first trench... In some caves resistance is extremely strong and prolonged. The Austro-Hungarians believe themselves safe and fire. The patrols are forced to fight. Reinforcements hurry forward; some exceedingly daring men leap down into the dens and throw bombs into the mass. Rifle flashes dart through the darkness: the tearing roar of bombs, screams... fighting in the immense caves around Selo and Corite...

The ferocity of the struggle, which drained the Third Army of 42,000 men in five days, was also acknowledged by the Austro-Hungarian Command, which described it as the hardest battle fought by the Isonzo Army.

It truly seems incredible that man's capacity for suffering and self-denial could reach such heights. On the 18th, the usual patrols had been released before the trenches held by the 13th Infantry of the Pinerolo Brigade to inspect the degree of destruction suffered by the enemy wire. One officer cadet failed to return from one of these expeditions and was listed as missing. Two days later, amid the fury of battle, soldiers found a blind creature covered with earth and blood: it was the very young officer, who had spent fifty hours between the opposing lines beneath the bombardment.

The regimental chaplain, who records this episode and was himself wounded a few days later, describes the hurricane of fire striking the front-line doline. On the 21st, five hundred shells exploded around the Bari dolina, while in many others ammunition stacks blew up and caused genuine massacres. "It was a true miracle that Lieutenant Stanghellini, who came to carry an order from regimental headquarters from the Cesana dolina to Bari, was not swept away by that whirlwind of fire."

Stanghellini, modest enough not to mention this courageous conduct in his memoirs, recalls those days as follows:

> Five times the fine soldiers of Abruzzo and Capitanata went into the assault, and five times the impetuous wave shattered against the intact enemy wire.
>
> When I close my eyes above the white pages I am filling with passionate recollection, I see an inferno of terrible flashes over the Bari, Cucchetti, Marchi and Fenulli doline; I see the dead of Motta, the Gaddi communication trench blocked at its upper end by rubble, by a stretcher bearing a corpse riddled by pellets, and by rolls of barbed wire - remember with me, Corporal Salvatore Piccirillo, the 21st of August. I see the whole line blazing with explosions beneath a rain of fragments and sharp stones; I see the floors of the communication trenches covered by a soft carpet of capes, packs, haversacks and dead men. I hear the terrible crashes that shattered the brain, the breathless pounding of my racing heart, the murmur of soldiers around the steaming rations in the Grano dolina during the weary evening after battle, and the still wearier silence of the hot August night, as though born from the dead and living together, from the same bloody despair...

The end of the 17th and 18th Bersaglieri Regiments, which together formed the 3rd Brigade of the 4th Division, is documented in the diary of a twenty-one-year-old second lieutenant:

> 19 August... The sun beats down with burning rays. Sections of trench are smashed... Many men pass with shattered legs and arms on the shoulders of stretcher-bearers. One wounded man is horrifying: the right side of his face has been entirely gouged away, without eyes, black and blood-covered, yet he is smoking! I learn that Major Mondello... has reached the houses of Castagnevizza. The fire is exceedingly deadly and the machine guns crackle. With the sun high, the few survivors of the first wave return to our line. The enemy is about to begin the counter-attack... The ground is scattered with dead and wounded men who stare sadly... The few remnants of the battalions are assembled. I am attached to the 17th for the assault at six in the evening. The night passes terribly.
>
> 20 August. At about six on the 20th the infantry of the 237th and 238th relieve us - what a disaster... Hundreds of metres of trench are blown into the air by our own trench mortars, which are firing too short. We leave through communication trenches filled with corpses...

Three days later Fraccaroli would write: "The bombardment of the Austrian first line was a masterpiece of the Italian artillery. The shells stormed upon the enemy entrenchments while, a few metres nearer beneath the howling trajectory, the Italians waited safely beneath the protection of that red-hot vault of fire."

> 22 August. At Point 244. My eyes are streaming from the dust and tear gas. I see a confused mass upon the ground... perhaps men of my battalion. I shake them... they are dead... After various adventures we arrive a few metres from the Austrians on the ridge of a very small dolina. There are other Bersaglieri... Raging thirst! I feel as though half asleep.
>
> 23 August. The sun rises and the waiting becomes terrible. Half-fainting from weakness and parched throats. Time passes; one becomes delirious. The whole height is taken and contact is restored with the Pinerolo Brigade... Moans and curses. Water, water!... The 268th Infantry will come. The relief begins in confusion... My colonel of the 18th is dead on the height, having killed himself in despair because he could obtain no reinforcements and had to withdraw from the captured position. It is estimated that fifty-four brigade officers have been put out of action, most of them dead. The remnants of the regiments have barely formed two battalions...

The suicide of the commander of the 18th Bersaglieri is also recalled by Gasparotto, according to whom:

> ... The gallant Colonel Pedrocchi, between Castagnevizza and Versic, seeing almost all his Bersaglieri dead, shot himself on receiving news of the relief, saying: "Ah! I shall not leave my soldiers."

On the enemy side too, so stubborn a defence required far more than cold blood; it required the clouding of the senses and cancellation of the instinct of self-preservation. Lieutenant Weber, a battery commander on the slopes of Hermada, witnessed the repeated Italian assaults:

> ... I glance out of the trench. The Italians are coming. They are already very close and in great numbers. They run although the slope is extremely steep. Other waves follow the first. Infernal rifle fire receives them. One machine gun begins firing, then a second and a third. They have already suffered losses, but leaving behind a line of black, motionless dots they continue to advance...
>
> Suddenly a black cloud rises in the middle of the attacking mass. The mortars positioned behind Hermada are at work. Dozens of bodies lie inside the immense crater dug by the explosion...
>
> The barrage... draws a curtain of death between the attackers and their positions. Held by the final remnants of wire and entangled in it, the Italians are struck by the first hand grenades.
>
> ... images, images... men in grotesque positions threading their way through the wire, little clouds of smoke among them, severed legs, stumps waving, sudden falls. One Italian has dropped his rifle and continues to stagger forward with his hands before his face. His gas mask hangs from his neck and a streak of blood runs across his sleeves and chest. Suddenly he falls upon a tangle of barbed wire and his hands feel along the ground. His now uncovered face has been reduced to a shapeless bleeding mass...
>
> Suddenly, on our right, great skeins of black smoke rise and obscure the sun, which appears as a faded yellow disc. A blast of burning air strikes my hands and face. Cries of pain reach us through the smoke. Flamethrowers.
>
> There is a smell of burnt flesh, benzol and burning clothes. The uproar has stopped abruptly. Through the thinning smoke I see two men running with their clothing in flames; they fall and roll moaning upon the ground. Several soldiers coming from our right cross the trench. The leading man, his face black with smoke, carries the flamethrower tube in his hands, its tip still burning. The group passes over the fallen and disappears. A second later a black cloud rises on our left.
>
> ... Anyone remaining in the open is lost in any case. News of the failed attack has already travelled along the telephone wires... Ten minutes later the bombardment of Hermada begins again, more violently than before...

Meanwhile the first Austrian reinforcements were arriving:

> Every night new infantry battalions arrive. Before them stands Hermada; behind them Trieste and the fate of the Isonzo front and of the "iron-hearted man", Marshal Boroevic. His grim and inflexible will communicates itself to all. The soldiers do not love him, for they have heard that he is cold, withdrawn and even cruel, but they believe in his star...

Thus the final attempt against Hermada failed. Artillery Lieutenant Giulio Blum, a sixty-two-year-old lieutenant, wished to take part in the Salerno Brigade's last assault. Waving a large tricolour flag, the old man advanced unsteadily at the head of young men who might have been his grandsons. A corporal came alongside and supported him, and did not tremble when the white-haired officer inevitably fell mortally wounded. Blum received the Gold Medal posthumously.

Yet the defenders of Hermada had shown no less courage:

> The Italians attacked the positions at the foot of Hermada with the greatest energy, but their efforts were vain. The 35th Division stood firm, as did the 28th, whose 2nd Bohemian and 47th Styrian regiments, once again pounded by the terrible fire of the heavy batteries at Sdobba, performed truly superhuman feats. When darkness began to fall [on the evening of the 23rd], the fury of the guns suddenly died away...

Throughout the great battle, the command exercised by the Italian Third Army had been a mixture of carelessness and nonchalance. Absurd orders and insane demands continued to be issued even when it was clear that success was vanishing.

The operational order issued by the Third Army on the evening of the 19th stated, with evident exaggeration, that our troops had "brilliantly overcome the enemy defences along the entire front". In proportion to such rosy successes, the directives for continuing the action the following morning were laid down: "The infantry will advance at precisely 8 a.m., after two hours of exceedingly violent preparatory fire by artillery of every calibre and by the trench mortars."

The fact that the preparation was to last two hours along the entire front, rather than being proportioned to the differing needs from sector to sector, revealed the predominance of a programmatic mentality which caused General Caviglia to say:

> They all conducted their operations bureaucratically, applying the formula: "After two hours of artillery preparation..." Why two hours and not half an hour or ten? How had they observed the effect of the batteries' fire? Had gaps been opened in the wire? Had the machine guns and small-calibre weapons in the caves been silenced? And if the first attacks showed that the preparation had failed to achieve its results, why insist the following day in exactly the same manner? Any madman is capable of having men killed.

If these were the sound principles of military art, the Duke of Aosta was violating every one of them.

> Advance, the Duke continued, with determination and vigour towards the objectives, passing beyond the enemy defences... The stubborn and gallant continuation of the offensive, with all the vigour of which our brave troops have already given proof today, will certainly succeed tomorrow in breaking him and ensuring us much greater and overwhelming successes.

His optimism radiated by order along the telephone wires - it was a grave fault to be "cowardly" - descending in cascade through the hierarchy. His Excellency General Ravazza, commander of XXV Army Corps, acknowledged that the losses had been "extremely grave", but could not fail to order the advance to be resumed along the entire front the next day. "The attack will be simultaneous, without hesitation or delay. The enemy trenches must be resolutely overcome, the defences passed and the assigned objectives approached with vigour and determination..."

General Ravazza acknowledged that he was demanding an "arduous task" from his troops, but possessed "firm confidence", and so forth. The operational order of XXIII Corps was equally full of the same tautological phrases, although it almost declared itself neutral by transferring responsibility to the superior command:

> Army headquarters orders an advance with determination and vigour along the entire front... Army headquarters holds commanders responsible for the precise and explicit execution of the above order...

At XIII Corps direct responsibility was instead assumed:

> The attack is to be simultaneous along the whole front; advance with determination and vigour towards the objectives, passing beyond the enemy defences stop. I hold commanders responsible for this precise and explicit order stop... units exhausted on the front are to be replaced as required stop...

In short, instead of requesting information and clarification from their subordinate units and formulating operational orders upon that basis, army-corps commands tended to paraphrase the directives of Army headquarters, which, being even farther from the battlefield, knew still less.

Yet while the infantry were again leaving their shelters at "precisely" eight o'clock, a despatch from the Supreme Command reached Third Army headquarters. Concerned that the operation might lead to great attrition without corresponding results, while the Second Army's first successes were already taking shape, Cadorna attempted to restrain Emanuele Filiberto's exuberance:

> It is my intention that today's resumption... should have full and unrestricted development only in the favourable event that the fighting proves decisively advantageous to our troops... Otherwise... it is my intention that the action should not be further reinforced today, in order to avoid for our troops those sterile battles of attrition whose characteristics are well known to Your Royal Highness. In this second case... the future resumption of the offensive, to be considered as a new problem, will be launched not after a few hours of fire but following a preparatory phase which must have regular and complete development. Your Royal Highness's conduct of today's operation must therefore be governed by the explicit and categorical directives stated above. Please give assurance.

The tone was rather hard despite being masked by telegraphic style. His Highness, however, took no notice, perhaps believing that victory lay within his grasp. Despite the "explicit" and "categorical" directives, the Supreme Command's telephone message was calmly ignored.

Instead of the requested "assurance", on the evening of the 20th, after another day of fierce and almost everywhere sterile fighting, the Duke of Aosta signed the operational order for the following day, an order sounding like a paean of victory. The enemy defence, it stated, had begun to "come apart", and the adversary was "disconcerted". It was therefore necessary "to exploit the advantages of this favourable situation", give the enemy no respite and, "through judicious employment of the troops", increasingly disorganise his structure.

> Tomorrow morning the attack will be resumed along the entire front. VIII, XI, XXV and XIII Army Corps will advance decisively to reach the assigned objectives...

The infantry's "simultaneous and vehement" leap forward would take place at 9:43 a.m., after "intense preparatory fire by artillery of every calibre and trench mortars lasting one hour".

The operational order of XXV Army Corps stated:

> ... The notable successes attained today by the Army's troops and the grave situation in which the enemy finds himself... require that, despite the grave losses and exhaustion of the troops, the offensive action should be continued with tenacity and resolution. A superhuman effort is demanded of our troops, but I have faith, etc.

And the order of XXIII Corps stated:

> Along the entire Army front the enemy defence has begun to come apart. The pressure exerted, particularly energetic upon our front, has disconcerted the adversary and compelled him to move his artillery. The advantages gained must be exploited and the enemy given no respite...

On the evening of the 21st, however, Cadorna intervened, this time with a peremptory order:

> The Third Army will suspend operations and remain ready in force to resume them when the attack upon the objectives assigned to it is ordered, compatibly with the forces and means remaining after the transfers referred to in paragraph IV below have been carried out. Meanwhile it will prepare the new deployment...

There followed directives for the transfer of approximately three hundred guns to the Second Army, in the hope that this assistance would allow the latter to widen the nearby breakthrough.

Faced with this imposition, Emanuele Filiberto yielded only partially. "Offensive operations," he ordered, "will be suspended from the morning of the 22nd." But what better way could there be to prevent the enemy from noticing the suspension than to continue fighting? Partial operations would therefore continue, but with "simultaneity, so that the enemy receives the impression that a fourth day of battle is beginning. After a violent artillery preparation lasting no more than half an hour, the infantry will advance at the same instant, at 1:33 p.m."

By a logic difficult to grasp, the more firmly the enemy defence consolidated and the smaller the previous day's progress became in comparison with the day before, the shorter the artillery preparation grew. In any event, this order too violated both the letter and the spirit of the Supreme Command's instructions, which had merely directed that the Third Army should leave no means untried "so that the enemy may sense this potential attitude and, under threat of a future resumption of the offensive, may move neither forces nor artillery from the Karst plateau to the Bainsizza plateau".

On the evening of 22 August, after a fourth day of fruitless fighting, yet another operational order was issued. While maintaining that the offensive was over, it directed the continuation of "partial" but "simultaneous" operations, to begin at 3:33 p.m. after no more than half an hour of "violent preparatory fire".

Thus the Third Army offensive faded little by little amid a whirlwind of tragic fighting, instead of ending abruptly as the Supreme Command intended; and the losses were correspondingly heavier.

The Second Army's mobile warfare, although it did not last for only a single morning, continued for just two days. By the evening of 26 August, after hours of marching beneath a sudden thunderstorm which arrived when it was least useful and transformed the tracks into muddy slides, our utterly exhausted troops were already in contact with the new fortified enemy line, feverishly strengthened by labour parties digging trenches day and night by torchlight.

XXVII Army Corps finally attacked the Lom defences to capture the wretched villages called Log, Hoie, Mesniak and Kal. It was reinforced by X Alpini Group, but supplies remained extremely difficult, the artillery was far away, and the enemy positions were strong and skilfully exploited. At Okroglo the Brescia Brigade, the 19th and 20th Infantry Regiments, lost 1,700 men.

X Alpini Group, composed of the Monte Berico, Vicenza, Morbegno and Val d'Adige Battalions, arrived from Trentino at full strength and was assigned the capture of Point 778, south of Hoie. The recently arrived Roma Brigade was given Point 774 on the right. Topographical maps were distributed, in the preparation of which a certain degree of imagination had played a part:

- These incomplete maps leave one perplexed, Lieutenant Bini Cima of the Val d'Adige Battalion observed, and in complete disagreement. May God send us good fortune.

God did not. Pounded by violent fire from elevated positions, the Alpini group and the Roma Brigade were severely mauled. The error immediately became obvious: Point 778 lay on the left, not in front of the Alpini group. An advance of seven hundred metres was dearly purchased: one company alone suffered thirty dead and one hundred wounded. That same day the Corriere della Sera printed this piece of puffery from Army headquarters:

> The [Second Army] Command had distributed thousands of copies to every unit headquarters of a wonderfully detailed and accurate topographical map, containing every indication of the terrain and enemy obstacles.

To remedy the error in the "wonderfully accurate" map, the capture of Point 778 had to be attempted again with a different deployment. Bini Cima continues:

> The order to attack arrived at noon for two o'clock. Several white cloth triangles with a red circle in the middle were distributed so that artillery observers could identify our advance and lengthen the fire accordingly.
>
> The triangle-bearers were the first to fall, and our own artillery struck us without mercy.
>
> The waves halted before the wire were torn to pieces by both Austrian and our own artillery. After these two beatings came relief; that is, Bini Cima says, "we were withdrawn to a dolina fifty metres behind the front line."

The Potenza Brigade, the 271st, 272nd and 273rd Infantry Regiments, was also consumed without result in that savage region. According to a lieutenant of the 852nd Machine-Gun Company, the soldiers were in poor condition, either too young or too old, and low in morale because, having only recently been incorporated into the newly formed brigade, they had not expected to be sent into the line so soon. After crossing the Avscek they found corpses everywhere, an unbearable stench and no water. They therefore drank the water from the machine-gun jackets, and within a few days the whole brigade was put out of action by dysentery.

In this pitiful sanitary condition, the Potenza was assigned the capture of Point 814 between Kal and Okroglo. The badly organised attack was even worse executed. To escape the fire, the infantry left the 852nd Machine-Gun Company exposed and caused it heavy losses. A few days later another objective was attempted: Koren, in the stoniest region of the Upper Bainsizza. It was a tragic failure. A machine-gun lieutenant went mad, as did a sergeant-major acting as deputy section commander, who continued to shout "Savoy!" to the bewilderment of his comrades even after everything was over. Nothing better could be found to replace the thinned and battered Potenza than the Lambro Brigade, already half destroyed beneath San Marco.

After these final actions, the Italian forward line on the Bainsizza became fixed along Log-Testen-Koprivisce-Point 814-Okroglo-Podlaka-Zagorje-Point 552 on San Gabriele.

For a moment Cadorna hoped to exploit the enemy's disorientation on the Bainsizza by attacking again on the Karst. On 26 August he ordered four hundred artillery pieces transferred from the Second to the Third Army. The communication was unwelcome to General Capello, who, with dark eyes and the muscles of his neck fearfully contracted, barely held a blasphemy in his throat. He continued muttering "sabotage, sabotage...", convinced that the means needed to widen the breach already achieved and already closed were deliberately being taken away from him.

Cadorna, after weighing the advantages and disadvantages, had instead decided to suspend further offensive action by the Second Army until the artillery could be moved to the left bank of the Isonzo and our numerical superiority made effective. Conversely, by accumulating every available man and item of matériel on the Third Army front, he still hoped to break the balance, especially since the Karst artillery deployment remained valid because no deep penetration had taken place. It was a complex operation that had to be prepared carefully after the latest bitter lessons.

On 29 August, meeting General Capello at Vipulzano, he verbally prescribed the new posture and then set it down in writing:

> ... The expenditure of forces and ammunition so far incurred during the present offensive requires the operational design of this Army to be reduced, essentially in order to concentrate the means and direct the offensive effort towards those objectives whose capture may have direct and favourable repercussions upon the Third Army's action on the Karst plateau.
>
> It is consequently necessary:

1. For the present, to suspend all offensive operations except those for which orders have already been issued...

2. To organise and consolidate the positions reached...

3. To study and prepare a plan of attack intended to cause the fall, from north to south and from west to east... of the whole block of the enemy defensive organisations in the Gorizia plateau... in preparation for the Third Army's further advance.

I include within the block, as is obvious, Monte San Gabriele and Monte San Daniele, and add that all the Army's offensive energies, supported by the most formidable possible artillery deployment, must be directed towards the conquest of the entire amphitheatre... As for the date, every effort must be made to be ready to resume operations by mid-September.

Chief of the General Staff of the Army
Cadorna

For the moment, and for several days, the fighting subsided almost everywhere and all Italy took pride in the supposed victory. Barzilai telegraphed the Giornale d'Italia: "Magnificent things!" Bissolati wrote to the Prime Minister: "I send you the kiss of victory." Orlando confessed: "The trumpets of fame sounded so loudly that they stunned even my critical sense."

Barzilai himself, interviewing General Cadorna for Il Secolo, managed to draw from him the statement that "the manoeuvre carried out in these days, for daring, scale, complexity and probable consequences and repercussions, is the greatest performed by any of the belligerent armies during the war". The Battle of the Bainsizza had been "a vigorous expression of the country's renewed energies". Thus, through persistent skull-stuffing, propaganda deceived itself.

All Italy grew bold at the sound of these great words resting upon the wind, and everyone had still more reason to continue doing as he pleased. At Civitavecchia, dockworkers enjoyed exemption from military service but, instead of unloading the steamers personally, hired boys whom they paid four or five lire out of the twelve lire they pocketed each day. A general arriving to inspect saw what was happening and withdrew the exemptions; a general strike was proclaimed. At the La Spezia naval arsenal, the female employees were too elegant, but threats of dismissal unless they dressed with greater austerity had little effect. A police raid upon the Grand Hotel Terme at Salsomaggiore revealed the existence of an illegal gambling den, where several politicians were also caught in the act but, out of consideration, were not detained.

The consciences of the dockworkers, arsenal employees and gamblers were nevertheless calm and serene. Did they not pay taxes precisely so that the Government could provide for the victims of war? For that very purpose, decree-law no. 876 had recently been published in the Official Military Journal. It fixed a daily pension of 3.45 lire for soldiers returning blind or with all four limbs amputated, 2.76 lire for the deaf, and 2.58 lire for a man who had lost his right hand. The payment fell to 2.07 lire a day for anyone fortunate enough to return, from duly recognised causes of war, epileptic or tuberculous.

Flags and interviews helped diminish the sinister meaning of a Ministry of the Interior communiqué reporting disturbances in Turin caused by a temporary shortage of bread, and of a second, equally brief communiqué stating that a small ammunition depot near Udine had exploded, causing "several casualties among servicemen and the civilian population".

The "small depot" was Italy's largest store of artillery shells and gas projectiles, hundreds of thousands of them stacked in various buildings in the Udine suburb of Sant'Osvaldo without any precautionary

measures. At eleven in the morning on 27 August the first detonation occurred, immediately followed by another more powerful one. Explosions and roars continued for an entire day, causing serious damage to the city, destroying some houses as far as ten kilometres away, killing one hundred people and wounding several hundred.

The panic was immense, partly because of the known presence of poison-gas shells, which fortunately did not explode. The disaster left the population in frozen dismay, all the more because it was attributed to omnipotent enemy sabotage. Although the cause was unknown, a scapegoat was found in Colonel Mazza, an able officer who had only recently assumed responsibility for those dangerous stores and had immediately demanded that they be cleared. He had in fact begun the transfer, but not quickly enough to avoid both the explosion and his own torpedoing.

At the front, the discipline of the Later Roman Empire still prevailed. On 30 August Captain Frescura wrote:

> A most agreeable cavalry captain, a gentleman by name and manner, returned today from one of our brigades, to which he was attached as liaison officer during the battle. He related how the brigadier general had several soldiers shot by the carabinieri without trial or questioning, to set an example.
>
> One of them, stunned by the battle, stared stupidly at the raging brigadier and failed to understand that the carabinieri were aiming their carbines at him. Another, frightened, ran away and was killed like a roe deer. A third, backed against a low wall, screamed while covering his face with his right arm, like a child caught doing wrong. A fourth, attacked with abuse by the brigadier, tried in vain to speak:
>
> "Excuse me, b-but I..."
>
> "Nothing! Shoot him! Shoot him!"
>
> While the other man, sobbing and terrified, tried vainly to explain himself, the good colleague, a gentleman by name and manner, intervened:
>
> "Excuse me, but let him speak... He may perfectly well have his papers in order!"
>
> "My dear fellow, it takes more than sentiment to deal with these scoundrels!"
>
> Meanwhile the soldier had collected his strength. Drawing from his pocket the brown case containing the Bronze Medal for Military Valour, he stammered through his sobs:
>
> "Excuse me, General, sir... I have just received the medal for valour in the field... I am going on leave... I..."
>
> Thus the man saved himself.
>
> Returning to his hospitable cave, the general then ordered his eighteen-year-old son, an officer cadet:
>
> "Write this telephone message to the division: 'The troops are advancing with irresistible impetus. No stragglers. I had a few cowards shot.'"

With the same charitable spirit, soldiers who were not seriously wounded were sent back into battle. Yet in those very days General Diaz, commander of XXIII Army Corps, was personally decorated with the Silver Medal by the Duke of Aosta because, while inspecting a section of the line where "fraternisation"

between our troops and the enemy was feared, a shrapnel ball that stopped between the cloth and lining of his tunic had bruised his right arm.

Immediately after the capture of Gorizia in August 1916, another "fateful" name had begun to flower sporadically in the official communiqués alongside Hermada, San Marco and Monte Santo: San Gabriele. At the end of August and during the first half of September 1917, it appeared with a frequency that promised nothing good to the experienced reader. Only one deduction was possible: large numbers of men were being sent there to slaughter.

Reduced to essentials, that is precisely what happened along the mountain's slopes during that part of the season. In the furnace of San Gabriele, the Italians and Austrians lost about forty thousand men in roughly thirty days. It was not one gigantic and bloody assault, but a continuous dripping away every hour and minute. The hill sucked young lives at a prodigious speed, like a particularly hungry Moloch. Most of the actions occurred within only two square kilometres.

The suspension of the offensive ordered by General Cadorna had not satisfied Capello. He went about fierce and enraged, brooding over the success achieved and the victory missed. The bulk of his army was confined between the Tolmino bridgehead and the San Gabriele massif like the body of a giant trapped between the bars of a prison. If only San Gabriele could be forced open. Yet once San Gabriele had fallen, how many other hills would be available to take its place in the Supreme Command's communiqués?

The order of 29 August did, however, permit him to do something: to attack the Austrian fortifications around Gorizia. He was allowed until mid-September to prepare, but Capello would bring the timetable forward and move at the beginning of the month. If he waited too long, the Austrians would grow stronger still. Had not the Supreme Command circulated the unwelcome news on 30 August that "the enemy is reported to be transferring troops from the Russian-Romanian front"? After so many unconfirmed rumours, enemy reinforcements truly were arriving from the East. During the previous few days the positions from San Gabriele to Vertoiba had already displayed an almost incredible power of resistance.

After the failure of the first fighting, a new local assault had been organised against the sector from San Gabriele to the Vipacco, simultaneous with the advance of our troops over the Bainsizza plateau. The action was begun on 24 August by the 11th Division of VI Army Corps, which sent the Messina Brigade against the Dol saddle and the "white rocks" of San Gabriele. Dol was captured immediately, while Veliki Hrib was reached and passed the following day.

The conquest lasted only briefly, for on the evening of the 25th Austrian counter-attacks drove the Messina infantrymen from Point 552 back to Point 526. On 27 August III/93rd, "after an exceedingly violent struggle", according to the official historian of the Italian brigades, recaptured Veliki and took its final two hundred defenders prisoner. The 67th and 68th Infantry Regiments also participated in the fighting, which again reached Point 252 and for a moment appeared to be turning in favour of the attackers, until the customary Austrian counter-attack finally drove them back to their starting lines.

Simultaneously with the attack against San Gabriele, an assault was launched on the front descending from Santa Caterina to Vertoiba. After an attempt by the Bergamo Brigade failed bloodily, VI Army Corps organised a larger effort for dawn on 28 August. On the San Marco-Grazigna front it caused the rapid destruction of four or five regiments.

One of them, the 254th Infantry, was commanded by a respected Florentine writer, Giulio Bechi. After the death of De Amicis, with whom he had enjoyed an affectionate friendship, Bechi had become Italy's

best-known writer on military subjects. Colonel Bechi, tall, fair-haired and relatively young at forty-four, was frank and open: moral qualities ill suited to his career.

The previous year, immediately after the capture of Gorizia, several journalists had interviewed him:

- Have you ever been to Gorizia, Major [22]?
- No, never, but I shall go, even if only to cross it and die in its trenches on the other side...
- What gloomy intentions! someone observed.
- Gloomy? Not at all. Reality, faced directly, speaks of this too. Victory will cost dearly, and someone will have to pay. There is no point remaining silent; the truth is what it is... War requires consciences nourished in this way, not blind and resigned ones.

As he went into the assault, he pencilled a note to General Di Benedetto, commander of the Porto Maurizio Brigade, of which his regiment formed part:

> I am going out at the head of my troops. The entire regiment follows me.

He continued exhorting and encouraging his men and speaking affectionately to them. Two projectiles pierced his intestines, but he did not die at once. He was taken to the military hospital at Gorizia, where he survived for thirty-six hours in the terrible agony of men wounded in the abdomen.

Both the 253rd and the 254th succeeded in capturing the enemy's first line, "but their enthusiasm breaks against the still intact enemy wire protecting the second trench line". The Austro-Hungarian reaction exploded with its customary promptness. That same night the Porto Maurizio was relieved by the Bergamo, sent back into the line despite the poverty of its strength.

Shortly after noon on Tuesday the 28th, at a cost of 1,700 men, the Emilia Brigade, the 119th and 120th Infantry Regiments, succeeded in establishing itself upon Point 100 and miraculously holding it. Great alarm and uproar nevertheless shook Second Army headquarters when it was discovered that, in breach of discipline, a carrier pigeon returning to base from the 119th Infantry bore beneath its wing a message reading "we are not immortal".

Instead of relief, which would have ensured not eternity but at least temporary survival, a message of encouragement addressed to every corps and the artillery arrived late in the day:

> Forward, forward everyone, to complete victory!
>
> Lieutenant General Commanding the Second Army
> Capello

Attacks and counter-attacks consequently continued until 31 August, repeating the events of three months earlier in a manner as monotonous as it was bloody. "Two disasters," Cadorna confided to Colonel Gatti, speaking of the attempts against San Marco and San Gabriele.

Since nothing had been achieved except a frightening extension of the casualty lists, General Capello devoted himself to studying an operation that would finally be effective.

The attack was devised according to the most modern style of military tactics as understood in 1917. Was this not a war of matériel, a war of attrition? Capello would concentrate iron and fire against San Gabriele in proportions never before seen either on the Italian front or elsewhere. Seven hundred medium-calibre guns, several hundred trench mortars and many field batteries were assembled to pound three or four kilometres of line. Between Italians and Austrians, 2,500 guns thus converged upon San Gabriele, which for several days enjoyed the honour, if not the pleasure, of being the most heavily shelled target on the globe.

For the third time the 11th Division received the melancholy task of storming the summit, Point 646. The infantry came from the Arno, Elba, Girgenti and Palermo Brigades, but the initial "static friction" would be overcome by the Black Flames of the 1st Assault Unit.

The commander of the Second Army personally addressed the Arditi to galvanise their already reckless spirit. He had brought the Black Flames, he said, the gift of an opportunity to carry out the boldest and greatest feat of the war: the capture of San Gabriele:

> The Arditi will certainly know how to overcome the terrifying barrier against which, unfortunately, the magnificent efforts and sublime courage of the finest infantry brigades have so far been shattered.

After this burst of sincerity, strong even for the Arditi, Capello was captured by the declamatory taste for the macabre which was now spreading and would submerge Italy for many decades. "I am certain," he concluded, "that you will return victorious or you will not return at all."

The assault unit, no stronger than a small battalion, departed Sdricca di Manzano on thirty lorries on the evening of 2 September amid savage shouts and war cries. On the 3rd the Arditi bivouacked along the bed of the Isonzo at Salcano, then entered the trenches held by the Arno Brigade, which had again attacked the impregnable summit without success on 31 August and 2 September.

During the night of 2-3 September, the destructive fire of our artillery began and continued throughout the following day. From the circle of mountains around Gorizia came a continual thunder of guns, while searchlight blades probed the darkness during the night. The plan called for one infantry battalion to follow each company of the assault unit. San Gabriele was to be enveloped from north and south and captured in a single rush after a very brief preparation of fire.

Arditi and infantrymen exchanged impressions during the few hours they shared the trench. Several soldiers were asked whether they wished to join the Arditi: better food, no exhausting tours in the trenches, and one great danger from time to time. Almost all declined, giving the same explanation: they did not love war and preferred chance to decide their lives without their taking the initiative.

On 4 September the sun rose into a clear and pure sky. The guns, silent throughout the night, suddenly resumed rapid and unprecedentedly violent fire for a few minutes and then stopped abruptly. With daggers between their teeth and hand grenades cupped in their palms, the Arditi attacked. For the first time they had the support of an armoured-car squadron, which was to cooperate in capturing the Dol strongpoint.

With overwhelming impetus the Austrian trenches were crossed, and before noon the Black Flames had reached the summit of San Gabriele and were preparing to climb the slopes of San Daniele. They were protagonists in a Dance of Death more realistic than the grand film of the same name, starring Soava Gallone, then showing in the principal Italian cinemas. Surprised in a cave, the Austrian general commanding the sector killed himself. Almost two thousand men were taken prisoner.

The sight of our soldiers silhouetted against the blue sky upon the smoking ridge of San Gabriele filled with enthusiasm everyone who had lived through those days of anguish with a heavy heart. Macaulay Trevelyan, serving with the British ambulance attached to the 11th Division, also rejoiced.

The enthusiasm was brief. The events that had prevented the capture of Monte Santo in May were repeated almost unchanged. As usual, General Capello blamed the troops for poor manoeuvring ability and lack of impetus:

> Unfortunately, the supporting units [of the 1st Assault Unit], which should have reached and held the captured position, did not advance in time. They lacked impetus and decision.

According to participants from both the assault battalion and the Arno Brigade, the truth was very different.

"The summit of the mountain was clear of enemies, but the mountain was full of enemies," wrote the Ardito Paolo Giudici. When the Arno troops left the trenches, they were received by exceedingly violent fire and an "appalling massacre" unfolded before the eyes of the Black Flames.

According to Gianni Corsaro, events developed as follows:

> Now the Arditi... must wait for the supporting troops. At this precise moment the fire of thousands upon thousands of Austrian guns breaks out with unprecedented violence. From the Chiapovano valley, the Ternova forest, the hills east of Gorizia and above all San Daniele, a hurricane of fire pours without a moment's respite upon the western slopes of San Gabriele.
>
> The battalions of the Arno Brigade climbing the slope to support the Arditi are caught beneath that infernal fire. In vain they seek protection in improvised trenches; in vain they try to advance with Spartan courage; in vain they seek caves for shelter. The Austrian interdiction fire is inexorable and the brigade is almost entirely destroyed without succeeding in reaching the objectives it had set itself.

Captain Sironi, an officer of the Arno, summarised the events while recalling his brigade's achievements:

> This year they fought at Monte Forno in the disastrous Operation K [the Battle of Ortigara], then spent forty days in the trenches on Faiti and afterwards on San Gabriele. San Gabriele! They remained beneath murderous fire from 29 August to 7 September; and on 4 September, in a dizzying assault together with the Assault Unit, they captured the summit, took the Austrians prisoner and opened a breach in the enemy front. But only thirty men reached and remained up there, more dead than alive...

What was lacking, therefore, was not so much the combatants' determination as the organisational ability of the 11th Division Command [23].

The Arditi remained alone. During the endless afternoon they repulsed the enemy four times, but by nightfall, reduced from four hundred men to one hundred and eighty, they had to adopt the defensive and withdraw. During the night a stronger Austrian counter-attack recaptured the summit.

Capello's anger descended upon the 11th Division. On 7 September he dismissed its commander, General Bonaini, and replaced him with General Allievi:

> The divisional headquarters directing the operation was too far away and too far outside the route followed by the supports, and could not influence them... it did not even realise that they had failed to intervene!!... But the ignorance of the course of the operation among the commands most directly concerned reached the point that Army Corps headquarters continued for two days to give assurances that its troops still held San Gabriele, although this was not true! To establish the real situation, I had to send one of my officers to the front line, where he verified that the position was no longer ours!!! These facts explain many things, including the reason for the considerable losses suffered.

The task of capturing San Gabriele was certainly no sinecure or coveted appointment. "Let us hope for the best," Ugo Ojetti wrote to his wife when the 11th Division changed commanders. Ojetti, a liaison officer with the division, was able to observe closely the efforts of our soldiers, as brave as they were sterile. "The troops behaved so well that I went to Army headquarters at Vipulzano and obtained praise for them from Capello."

In another letter dated 12 September he wrote:

> ... We have lost the summit of San Gabriele but still hold the Veliki ridge with tired troops.
>
> ... I am now writing a long report to the Army. Allievi is a rag. He has had a fever since yesterday evening. He spends whole quarter-hours without speaking. But sometimes he listens...

The events of 4 September were mentioned with prudent reserve in the following day's communiqué:

> North-east of Gorizia the battle is raging. During the day thirty-six officers and 1,602 other ranks belonging to ten different regiments were taken prisoner.

The extremely brief capture of the summit of San Gabriele nevertheless had worldwide resonance. General Wilson recorded it in his diary under 4 September:

> Foch came to see me this evening at ten. He came because Cadorna, who is doing good work - today he captured San Gabriele and took a thousand prisoners - needs the support of some guns...

Deputy Gasparotto entered the following in his diary on 5 September:

> As I go down to Fogliano, bands pass celebrating the fall of San Gabriele. The soldiers follow the music with heads held high...

The Supreme Command's reserve was rewarded during the following days. The sibylline phrase "North-east of Gorizia the fighting continues" was repeated with minor variations. Even the war correspondents, educated by previous experience, were more cautious in their reports than the Austrian press itself, which, preparing for the worst, openly regarded San Gabriele as lost.

Fraccaroli wrote on 7 September:

> Few battles have possessed the harshness, intensity and stubbornness of this one, which continues implacably, compressed and almost stacked within a narrow area. Upon the back of this mountain our artillery and the Austrian artillery strike with fury.
>
> By day the flanks are climbed by an irresistible succession of shells. One has the impression that everything must be drilled through...
>
> In the middle of the brazier, at these moments, an almost unreal spectacle can be seen. On the flanks, from holes, caves and shell craters, dark things can be seen springing out, bending and flattening themselves against the bare rocks and the flayed red earth, proceeding cautiously and then, with a leap, plunging into other holes. The vision disappears amid the haze of further explosions. Those dark things are men, our soldiers: small groups of Arditi, assault troops and infantry...

As the days passed, San Gabriele changed its face. Once covered by rich and dense woodland, it now assumed the terrible nakedness of a Saharan height, all flashes of flame and streams of blood. Within its depths the suffering and sacrifice of the defenders were no less savage than those of the attackers. Yet the Habsburg soldiers, most of them Romanians and Slavs, later reinforced by the Magyars of the famous 20th Honved Division recalled from Volhynia, fought so stubbornly that, Fraccaroli again observed, "there is no sign of exhaustion in the Austrian resistance". If this were to serve as a guide to the future, there was little hope that Austria would collapse.

The Austrian commanders themselves, however, marvelled at the prodigious endurance of their soldiers. Colonel Pitreich expressed himself as follows:

> [The struggle around San Gabriele] constituted, for attackers and defenders alike, a chapter apart in the psychology of war, proving the capacity of human nerves to endure... Neither side, literally wedged into the other, released its grip until events radically altered the military situation.

The battles for San Gabriele were characterised by a density of fire never again equalled. Trevelyan testified:

> During the last ten days, the fire upon the upper half of the road [over the Dol saddle] progressively increased. While we now kept to the more protected lower half, the infantry and muleteers suffered extremely heavy losses higher up. At this period of the war both sides employed heavy matériel of great power. One morning I saw a heap of thirty dead men covered with dust at the edge of the road. Elsewhere heads and limbs, mingled with great boulders, lay scattered along the roadway; and in the trenches above there was undoubtedly much worse. During the first half of September 1917, San Gabriele was a terrifying slaughterhouse, surrounded by the concentrated fire of the two masses of artillery, then at full efficiency.

The consequences of all this for the nature of the fighting were also reflected in the ratio of dead to wounded, which was higher than in any preceding or subsequent battle.

After the ephemeral victory of 4 September, exceedingly bitter fighting continued until the 8th in a continual convulsion of attacks and counter-attacks. On the 6th, at Veliki Hrib, the commander of the 248th Infantry of the Girgenti Brigade was killed. Without any apparent reason, the brigade was the unit most heavily sacrificed in the Tenth and Eleventh Battles of the Isonzo: between 15 May and 15 September, 250 officers and 8,000 soldiers disappeared from its ranks. The losses of other units that fought around San Gabriele, such as the Elba Brigade, the 261st and 262nd Infantry Regiments, are unknown, appearing neither in the brigade diary nor in those of the regiments.

Disappointed by the failure of San Gabriele to fall, Capello believed he could solve the problem differently. Temporarily suspending the bloody infantry attacks, he ordered a genuine siege by fire, maintained by medium- and heavy-calibre artillery directed to bombard the slopes continuously and prevent supplies from reaching the defenders. For three days, from 8 to 10 September, the Italian guns thundered without pause but apparently without result. Cadorna, who had reluctantly authorised an experiment from which he expected nothing decisive, had it stopped when he saw that the ammunition reserve was falling below the safety limit.

The San Gabriele adventure did not end there. During the night of the 8th another Italian brigade, the Foggia, the 281st, 282nd and 283rd Infantry Regiments, was brought near the front lines. The Foggia was the most recently formed brigade and was receiving its baptism of fire. On the morning of 12 September the Austrians launched a counter-offensive, preceded by assault units, and drove a wedge between two Foggia battalions. They then spread towards Veliki Hrib and westwards down the slope of San Gabriele extending towards Kamarska. Several thousand Italian soldiers belonging to the Foggia and Girgenti Brigades, caught between these forces and other units advancing northwards from Santa Caterina, were surrounded and destroyed.

During the following weeks, until the Caporetto retreat, the fighting north-east of Gorizia continued sporadically but was always bloody. Since the front on which the struggle raged was held by two or three divisions, particularly the 8th and 11th, the following casualty list between Veliki Hrib and San Marco gives an idea of the deadly "rotation" suffered by the Italian infantry brigades in that area between the end of August and the end of September 1917.

Italian infantry-brigade casualties between Veliki Hrib and San Marco

Brigade	Casualties
Bergamo	600
Ferrara	1,900
Abruzzi	700

Palermo	1,800
Messina	1,700
Treviso	2,000 (?)
Arno	2,100
Campobasso	2,200
Ionio	800
Girgenti	2,000
Porto Maurizio	1,100
Elba	2,500 (?)
Foggia	3,000
Total	**22,400**

Adding the losses of the assault units, artillery and engineers brings the total close to 25,000 men, almost one thousand men a day along a frontage no greater than five kilometres, while the forces present in the line never exceeded seven or eight thousand.

The 11th Division alone lost 10,000 men during the ten days from 4 to 14 September. Anyone who passed through San Gabriele at that time felt as though he were playing Russian roulette, but with far more than a one-in-six chance of leaving his skin there. So bloody a battle necessarily had few survivors and therefore few witnesses. Thus, while Hannibal and the Battle of Cannae are studied in abundant detail, the agony of San Gabriele is now forgotten and neglected.

That tragedy left many bleeding wounds and a bitter taste. Luigi Albertini writes:

> Those who visited the front during that period know that the persistence in the operation against San Gabriele was unanimously regarded as a grave error, and that Cadorna's fault, if fault he had, was to authorise it at the price of sacrifices no less grave than sterile...

Capello, embittered by the failures suffered, seemed to have lost the light of reason and to be dominated by anger. His methods aroused doubts even in men who had previously exalted him. Ugo Ojetti confided to his wife:

> What you say about Capello may be right. For many months I believed that a certain amount of cruelty was necessary for the exercise of authority in war. But it is not true. Living closer to the real war, I see that only good men possess authority in deeds and not merely in grand words, also because they succeed in entering more deeply into the minds of those they command.

Giovanni Amendola wrote to Malagodi:

> [Our officer cadres] have suffered greatly in this offensive because of Capello's obstinacy in wishing to capture San Gabriele at any cost. Capello is intellectually the most gifted of our generals; he conceives well and with great precision and clarity. But when action begins he sees red and never senses the moment to stop. Cadorna did not favour the stubborn effort for San Gabriele.

The "official" explanation, perhaps offered to avoid mortifying those invited to sacrifice themselves, was that the operation against San Gabriele saved the newly captured Bainsizza. Had the Austrian reserves not been diverted towards that furnace, a sudden counter-offensive could easily have broken through our precarious lines on the plateau. Time was instead gained to open new roads across the inaccessible terrain, and with the roads came the ability to transport guns of every calibre and supplies

of every kind onto the Bainsizza. Unfortunately, this enabled the enemy to take a richer booty when we retreated.

The commander of the Third Army, a fortunate man but an unfortunate general, transferred his bad fortune to his subordinates. The recent Karst offensive had been an almost literal repetition of the May offensive in both course and results. Then on 4 September, exactly three months after their first counter-offensive, the Austrians launched a second to retake the few positions we had captured and recaptured.

The usual Boroevic, assisted by the usual Pitreich - two specialists, in short - together with General Csicserics, commander of the Austrian XXIII Corps, organised a counter-attack with forces scraped together from the three divisions in the line, the 12th, 35th and 28th. The counter-offensive coincided with the promotion of the Isonzo Army to an Army Group, the First and Second Isonzo Armies, opposed respectively to our Third and Second Armies.

The assault began at 5:30 in the morning after a very brief and violent artillery preparation, almost at the same instant as the Italians attacked San Gabriele. Our XXIII and XIII Army Corps were struck, while operations of lesser importance extended as far as Castagnevizza.

Arnaldo Fraccaroli wrote:

> The Austrians were being hurled in waves against our men. They advanced in their characteristic formation of closely packed masses, offering our fire an immense and certain target...

Apart from the limited truth of the "closely packed masses" and "immense target", the enemy was easily repulsed at many points. In the 4th Division sector attacks and counter-attacks alternated throughout the day. Gasparotto relates:

> The sky is dark and starry, while the ground and air resound with explosions. But no more than five minutes pass, perhaps only three, before a hundred explosions and a hundred synchronous, sharp, precise and imposing voices rise as one voice and one man obeying an invisible signal, from the road, the doline, every fold in the ground behind us, and as far away as the Vallone. The flashes of the heavy siege artillery blaze from Devetaki, Opacchiasella and Loquizza. It is the Italian reply.

The field batteries also began firing at a rapid rate: one hundred and fifty rounds an hour. This lightning intervention broke the attack in the Castagnevizza sector, demonstrating what might have been achieved on other occasions through more flexible employment of the artillery. Austrian losses were heavy:

> The interception station has learned that the enemy patrols which attacked our brigade [the Siracusa] lost sixty per cent of their men...
>
> ... Another conversation intercepted at half past one [in the afternoon]: "The assault troops ran away this morning."

At three in the afternoon the Italians counter-attacked in the 4th Division sector. On this occasion it was the Austrians who gave proof of technical skill, as was not unusual for them. Captain Flores watched the fighting from an artillery observation post:

> Amid the whistling of shells and fragments of every kind, whole platoons, small groups of men following one another along the same route and isolated infantrymen, preceded by officers and NCOs, moved towards the trenches opposite... The rush of our men across those stone fields scorched by the sun and the fury of battle was slowed by enemy fire, which soon left numerous dead and wounded upon the ground...
>
> A second and then a third infantry wave coming up in support appeared driven by a mysterious force tending to gather rapidly the few survivors of the first echelon and project them all into the enemy trench. In an instant our infantry disappeared into the Austrian trenches, carrying there a savage cry

> of despair and victory which must have annihilated the defenders... A furious struggle, brief but deadly, closed that epic moment, and for a short time victory seemed to smile upon the courage and valour of our men.
>
> But the illusion was to be brief!
>
> Violent Austrian suppressive fire immediately struck the line we had reached and transformed its edge into a blazing furnace. Human fragments mingled with stones and shattered wood danced in a terrifying whirl... and soon the few survivors were seen flowing back, torn and bleeding, running towards the starting trenches.

In any event, the enemy did not advance a step. Matters went worse on the front of XIII Army Corps. II/65th Infantry, established among the reeds of the Lisert, was overwhelmed and destroyed by assault troops which again reached the first railway viaduct at Duino, where the regimental headquarters was located. Throwing grenades, the Austrians caused an ammunition depot to explode, and the entire headquarters, including the colonel, was blown up.

The Valtellina Brigade was half destroyed, losing three thousand men that day, while the Catanzaro fell back until the Toscana and Arezzo Brigades could hurry to reinforce it. The Veneto, Caserta and Catania Brigades were also violently attacked and driven back here and there. The heights facing the Flondar line were lost for the final time.

During the night of 4-5 September, exploiting the moment when the Murge Brigade was relieving the Veneto, Arezzo and Salerno, the Austrians captured Point 146 and resisted our counter-attacks. At dawn on the 6th, the counter-offensive resumed along the XIII Army Corps front, forcing it to withdraw step by step to the line held before 19 August. Our losses during the three days of fighting were not fewer than 10,000 men; Austrian losses too were heavy.

During the Battle of the Bainsizza, General Cadorna's conduct had at times been hesitant and uncertain. He was pleasantly surprised by the breakthrough on the Bainsizza, but much less pleased by the failure to break the Karst front, a problem that remained insoluble. How many forces would have to be massed on the Karst to break the enemy front? Would it ever be possible to assemble and pack them there?

Other worries tormented him. Losses had been grave, even though proportionally lower than in May, and now certain reports spoke of the hasty arrival of Austro-Hungarian forces from the Russian-Romanian front.

After the failure of the operation organised by Capello against San Gabriele, Cadorna again considered the practical possibility of resuming the battle in mid-September. On 10 September he instructed the Second Army:

> The next resumption of the offensive [must] aim at objectives whose capture may have direct and favourable repercussions upon the Third Army's action on the Karst plateau. It will therefore be intended to bring about the fall of the block of enemy offensive organisations in the Gorizia amphitheatre. Operations against the Lom plateau in the first phase and against the Tolmino basin do not therefore fall within the operations I currently intend, because they are incompatible with the present availability of men and ammunition.

In any event, this new effort was postponed from the middle to the end of the month in order to accumulate the indispensable ammunition.

A preliminary balance could now be drawn. The summer offensive had cost Italy extremely heavy losses: 46,000 dead, 120,000 wounded and 16,000 prisoners between 1 August and the end of September. The Isonzo Army reported losing 85,000 men between 17 August and 6 September; it is

therefore probable that Austro-Hungarian losses during August and September along the entire Italian front exceeded 100,000 by a considerable margin, although 31,000 of them had been taken prisoner.

In total, between mid-May and the end of September the Italian army lost 400,000 soldiers, while the Austro-Hungarian army lost 230,000 or 240,000. During the same period, the number of sick men was approximately half a million. It was a practical demonstration of attritional warfare.

Although Austro-Hungarian losses had once again been considerably lower than the Italian losses, though not in the same proportion as in the spring battle, they weighed heavily upon the exhausted structure of the army. With the many commitments it still possessed on the Eastern Front, whose future was unfathomable, it was subjected to exhausting tension.

Material losses too were high: 145 guns captured by us, almost as many blown up or otherwise destroyed, and 560 artillery pieces damaged to varying degrees. Half the artillery, in short, had been permanently or temporarily put out of action.

As for the Italian losses, a more detailed analysis shows that the army corps which suffered by far the lowest casualties, approximately nine thousand men, was XXIV Corps, although it captured eleven thousand prisoners and put several thousand more enemy soldiers out of action. Attrition was therefore lowest in the unit which advanced most deeply and fought longest: a clear indication that wherever an enlightened command could impose a semblance of mobile warfare, the attacker gained a decisive advantage. The enemy command profited from the lesson.

At the end of the Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo, the strength of the mobilised Italian army had fallen, this time irretrievably. Between 12 August and 23 September its numerical strength decreased by 190,000 men. To maintain the same number of units, the establishment of infantry companies had to be reduced first to 175 and then to 150 men. Nor was there another young class ready to enter the ranks, since it seemed too risky to burn the last precious conscription class, the men born in 1899, who had been under arms since the middle of the year.

Meanwhile the news from Russia continued to worsen. With his mind disturbed by this combination of circumstances, Cadorna received a telegram on 18 September: General Kornilov's putsch had failed, and it was better not to count upon any future Russian contribution. "We have lost all hope," the General told his staff.

Within a few minutes, whatever uncertainty remained in his mind turned into firm determination: no further offensive until new orders. He prepared a long letter for the Ministry of War. "The grave reports," it stated, "concerning the worsening internal situation in Russia and the now irreparable disintegration of that army, received during the last few days from our military attaché, alter the whole picture."

Reliable indications also led him to regard a violent Austrian offensive on the Julian front as not improbable, an offensive which already appeared to be in an advanced state of preparation. In the present shortage of replacements and ammunition it was therefore no longer conceivable to continue the August offensive, which would have amounted to suicide. On the one hand, achieving a serious success appeared unlikely; on the other, a possible failure "would have the gravest repercussions upon the moral resistance of the army and, above all, the country":"

> That being so, I need not demonstrate to Your Excellency what situation imposes itself. Should the Russian situation deteriorate still further, we may find ourselves during the remaining part of this operational season, and certainly in the spring, faced by an enemy decidedly superior in numbers and animated by the intention of attacking in force. It is therefore with the keenest regret that I have had to decide to suspend preparations for the projected resumption of the offensive and instead

devote myself to reorganising the forces and arranging everything for a firm defence to the bitter end along the entire front, so that none of the events that may result from the irreparable disintegration of the Russian army may find us unprepared.

I have today issued orders to the army commands accordingly.

I request Your Excellency to bring the above to the attention of His Excellency the President of the Council of Ministers.

The order to which Cadorna referred, sent that same day to the commanders of the Second and Third Armies, was clear and unequivocal. For the first time, the general of the offensive chose to adopt the defensive for an indefinite period:

18 September 1917

To His Royal Highness the Commander of the Third Army
To His Excellency the Commander of the Second Army

The continual growth of the enemy forces on the Julian front makes it probable that the enemy intends shortly to launch a serious attack there, all the more violent the greater the forces he can withdraw from the Russian front, where the situation appears to be deteriorating entirely to the advantage of our adversaries. Taking account of this, and of the situation regarding replacements and ammunition, well known to Your Royal Highness and Your Excellency, I have decided to abandon the projected offensive operations and concentrate every activity upon preparations for a defence to the bitter end, so that the possible enemy attack may find us validly prepared to repel it.

I therefore request Your Royal Highness and Your Excellency to direct from now on every preparation, the activity of the troops, the deployment of the artillery and the urgency of the works in accordance with these precise directives.

Chief of the General Staff of the Army
L. Cadorna

CHAPTER SIX

UNCERTAIN WAITING

Bad Kreuznach, on the Nahe, a small tributary of the Rhine, was the seat of the German Great Headquarters. Since Ludendorff, with Hindenburg's consent, concerned himself not only with matters falling within his responsibilities but also with subjects beyond his competence, Kreuznach - the heart of the imperial army - had become Germany's second capital. From there a policy was conducted in notable conflict with the one Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg sought to direct from Berlin. The Hindenburg-Ludendorff pair had assumed its own distinctive character: a kind of government operating in parallel with the legitimate one, in which Hindenburg reserved for himself the role of sovereign and left Ludendorff, officially "Quartermaster-General", the duties of prime minister.

At the beginning of the summer of 1917, Ludendorff's uneasiness was lessened by the feeling that he might finally be shaking off the Eastern Front and could begin settling accounts with the gentlemen of the Entente. As for the Americans, German opinion was almost as superficial as that of the Western Allies: the Yanks were far away and did not know how to fight. Should they show any desire to cross the Atlantic, German submarines would send them to the fishes. Russia remained difficult to predict and certainly dangerous to probe. What if a German attack rekindled Slavic national spirit? Prudence and patience, therefore.

The test the Germans did not dare seek was offered to them freely by the enemy governments.

- I order you: forward! Kerensky had cried to his unfortunate generals.

On 1 July the bloated army set out. Those who wished to fight did so. While certain units showed their customary courage and former enthusiasm, in other formations the infantry threatened to kill the artillerymen if they dared open fire and "disturb" the enemy. It is therefore incorrect to call such preparation cursory. There was no preparation at all, and officers were encouraged to advance, leading whatever willing men they could persuade.

Like a prehistoric monster, the Russian offensive descended upon weak and politically doubtful units between Ternopol and the Tatar Pass. Forty-four divisions, selected from among the least unreliable and largely composed of Siberian elements, advanced along a hundred-kilometre front against about twelve German, Austro-Hungarian and Turkish divisions. The artillery fire was disorderly but abundant: long months of inactivity had finally filled the Russian depots.

Within a few days thirty thousand prisoners were captured and Lemberg was again threatened. An Austrian army corps broke up and several Czech regiments went over to the enemy. Four German divisions were hurriedly withdrawn from the Western Front - for the last time - although the British offensive in Flanders was expected from one day to the next.

At the first serious resistance, however, the fighting spirit of the new revolutionary Russian army revealed its lack of substance. Within eight days the situation was reversed, and after German counter-attacks the Russian Eleventh Army reported that an immense disaster was taking shape. The troops began streaming back in disorder, moving through plunder and destruction towards the interior and their homes. The ground rapidly gained was abandoned even more quickly, and the principal starting base, Ternopol, was occupied by the Austro-Germans at the end of July. There, at the state frontier, the troops of the Central Powers stopped more for political expediency than because their possibilities had been exhausted.

The Russian catastrophe revived the spirits of the German extremists. Looking back to the previous year, they could congratulate themselves by comparing the extreme danger created in 1916 by Brusilov's offensive with the lightness of the present situation. Little remained of the Eastern Front: the Romanians in Moldavia, who continued to defend themselves stubbornly, and several Russian corps.

The Kaiser could scarcely contain himself and continued travelling by special train between Homburg, Kreuznach and the different fronts to inspect the new conquests of his incomparable troops. From a hill overlooking Ternopol he watched the Russians retreat, closely pursued by the 1st Guards Division. Someone in his entourage remarked:

- Like manoeuvres, but much quieter.

Wilhelm could therefore encourage the depressed Austrian dignitaries, for whom the end of the war on the Eastern Front represented the only means of carrying on. Several weeks earlier the Austrian minister Seidler had tried to explain the Habsburg Empire's difficult situation to the Kaiser, but was inundated by charts and figures which his interlocutor expelled with such violence that he was left speechless and unable to react.

Detested by everyone, and especially by the High Command, Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg resigned during those days. He had begun the war but did not seem willing to carry it through with the necessary energy. He was succeeded by Michaelis, until then Prussian Minister of Agriculture - "a rather insignificant man", Wilhelm commented - who was so incapable that he invariably answered yes to Ludendorff's demands and political line.

Everything therefore appeared for the best. The Entente was starving, Russia was dissolving, and the Americans would be sunk. Hindenburg telegraphed the Pan-Germanists: "The times are hard, but victory is certain." Stripped of its initial reservation, the phrase was printed on millions of posters, flooding the streets and covering the walls of German houses. It resembled a gigantic bill guaranteed by the most illustrious banker: "VICTORY IS CERTAIN. HINDENBURG."

For those in the know, however, matters were not proceeding so smoothly. In July and August five thousand sailors from the battleships Friedrich der Grosse, Prinzregent Luitpold and Westfalen mutinied; promises, threats and several "salutary" executions were needed to restore order and discipline. On the Western Front, field commanders including Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, emulating Deputy Treves, considered it inconceivable that the troops could endure another winter in the trenches. The Fourth Army alone, General von Armin told His Majesty, had lost eighty-four thousand men in Flanders during July and August against the exceedingly stubborn British.

Then there were the Austrians, always begging for help. But now, while the Italians attacked them for the eleventh time on the Isonzo, their appeal was more anguished than usual.

The assault upon the Bainsizza plateau had stretched the Austrian front to breaking point. Only Goiginger's obstinacy and intuition had prevented Marshal Boroevic from withdrawing the entire deployment beyond the Chiapovano valley. But could one hope to resist another assault successfully from the precarious positions halfway across the Bainsizza? On the other hand, withdrawing from the Bainsizza meant taking refuge on the Ternova plateau and perhaps farther east: the defences of the Gorizia amphitheatre would be turned, the fortresses of San Gabriele and San Daniele threatened from the rear, the Karst front struck in the flank, and Trieste - how long could Trieste be held in those conditions?

Thus, while scorched by the burning sun the Italian infantry advanced across the arid rocky slopes towards the extreme edge of the plateau, along whose crest the Austro-Hungarians, with the ravine

behind them, prepared to make a desperate stand, the Austrian Command decided to wait no longer and to attack.

General von Cramon, permanent representative of German Great Headquarters at the Austro-Hungarian High Command, had mentioned a possible offensive against Italy during a visit to Kreuznach at the beginning of August. The Austrians, he said, were now unanimous in considering German assistance indispensable on the Italian front. Even Emperor Karl, who had always opposed it, had become convinced that cooperation was unavoidable.

At that moment Ludendorff disagreed, with his whole attention turned eastward towards Moldavia, in order finally to put the Romanians and the remaining effective Russian troops out of action. From the living space gained in the east he hoped the Central Powers would draw the resources needed to survive until the great offensive in the west, carried out with the support of the many divisions recoverable from the Russian-Romanian front. An offensive against Italy disturbed the pattern and clouded a vision that had hitherto seemed clear.

Stubbornly attached to his conceptions, Ludendorff - the brilliant tactician, conqueror of Liège and victor of Tannenberg, the Masurian Lakes and Augustów - was making the same error as his greatly despised predecessor, General Falkenhayn. Yet Ludendorff was in a better position than Falkenhayn to see, in the light of recent experience, how many successes had been achieved through a modest unity of purpose. In the autumn of 1915 Serbia and Montenegro had disappeared; in 1916 Romania had been crushed; between 1915 and 1917 Russia had been brought down. Was it so difficult to find a dozen German divisions to send temporarily to the Italian front? During the height of the Battle of the Somme, had the Germans not scraped together enough forces to halt Brusilov's advance? What prospects would open if the Italian army were completely routed and a new south-western front exhausted the Franco-British?

These arguments were put to Ludendorff by Colonel Wetzell, head of his Operations Section. Although Ludendorff was hypnotised by the idea of the great offensive in the West, according to the classical and not always correct theory of seeking the supreme contest against the strongest enemy, he could not disregard the opinion of his right-hand man, who regarded an early success in Italy as highly important. Yet he was reluctant to abandon the Moldavian offensive:

> an operation of far greater importance than an action against Italy. That attack might have brought us much closer to the end of the war on the Eastern Front...

He did not realise that the war on the Eastern Front was already practically over.

While Ludendorff struggled with uncertainty, Hindenburg showed greater understanding of the needs outlined. There was little point expanding eastward if a front so close to the vital parts of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy was collapsing. If Austria, which in three years had suffered six million men put out of action, could no longer manage alone, it was right to assist her.

While the Battle of the Bainsizza was in full progress, a council of war was held among the most authoritative generals of the Empire.

First question: continue defending or attack?

- Attack. The answer was obvious and unanimous.
- Otherwise we are done for, General Seidler commented.

Second question: where to attack?

- From the Trentino salient, Conrad said.

- From the Upper Isonzo, Boroevic replied.

Both possessed excellent arguments in favour of their respective theses. Conrad's plan, which the former Chief of the General Staff had ordered studied during the winter of 1916-17, certainly had the character of radical medicine: a grand design requiring forty-two divisions in addition to the garrison troops and intended to erase Italy from the map, in accordance with the old Marshal's never-abandoned aspiration. It was the practical implementation of the "disastrous" hypothesis considered the previous July by the inter-Allied conference in Paris.

It was not really a single manoeuvre but a double assault. The principal attack would be launched from Trentino with twenty-three divisions, while the action modestly described as subsidiary on the Isonzo front would employ nineteen. Germany was asked for twelve divisions, while Austria was to supply thirty. Caught in this vice, Italy could hope only for the victors' mercy.

Such a deployment of forces, however, not only exceeded Austria-Hungary's current possibilities but conflicted with Ludendorff's known ideas. What was the purpose of this grand design? To put Italy out of the war? Italy had no possibility of leaving the war without the Entente's consent, since she depended upon it for essential supplies. Ludendorff would never accept such fantastic projects.

It was necessary to limit oneself to the reasonable: give Italy a sound beating from which she would struggle to recover. The rest would follow in the spring with general victory on the fields of France.

Here Boroevic's proposal came into play: an attack from Tolmino threatening the rear of the Italian Isonzo armies and forcing them to withdraw towards the old frontier. A modest objective with modest but certain results, not old Conrad's boasting. There was also good reason to hope that the Italians would be caught during a crisis of replacements, with their Second Army exhausted by the recent battles - Capello's army, the army of the fierce and most hated commander, as deserters declared in chorus to justify their own cowardice. Finally, the Tolmino sector was poorly and inadequately defended.

The Upper Isonzo, then. On 25 August, while the Italians closely pressed the Austrian XXIV Corps on the Bainsizza, Chief of the General Staff Arz requested Emperor Karl's authorisation to begin preparations for the offensive and received it.

German cooperation had already been secured in principle. The details now had to be defined. At this point, however, Emperor Karl's untimely interference threatened to wreck the negotiations. Engaged in secret negotiations with the Entente, Karl did not wish to attract Franco-British divisions to the Italian front through the bait of German troops. From his point of view, it was better for the offensive to remain an internal Italo-Austrian affair. He therefore asked that German troops replace on the Russian front the Austrian divisions to be sent to Italy.

In a letter of 26 August addressed to the Kaiser and delivered by hand the following day by General Waldstätten, Emperor Karl expressed his reticent wishes:

> ... I therefore ask you, dear friend, to influence your General Staff so that the Austro-Hungarian divisions now in the East may be left at our disposal and replaced by German troops... German artillery alone, particularly the heaviest pieces, would be welcome to me and my army as valuable assistance in the Italian theatre of war...

The Austrian General Staff thought otherwise, concerned only with ensuring good prospects of success for the coming offensive. The physical presence of the Germans was desirable for many reasons, including psychological ones. Emperor Karl was disavowed by his military entourage, and practical organisation of the complex manoeuvre began.

The delicate task of inspecting the section of the Italian front the Austrians proposed to attack was entrusted to a man who understood such matters: General Krafft von Dellmensingen. In August 1914 he had served as Chief of Staff of the German Sixth Army under Crown Prince Rupprecht; he had therefore seen the war from its beginning. In May 1915, when Italy entered the conflict, Krafft had been sent to the Italian front at the head of a mountain division, but was forbidden to take part in fighting because Italy had not declared war upon Germany: it was an observer mission, with authority to intervene only in an emergency. In 1916 he had commanded an Alpine corps in the Romanian campaign.

Krafft von Dellmensingen possessed a considerable advantage over our generals. Nourished on the most commonplace ideas about the superiority of the German race, he was already convinced before the event that, once the Germans set about fighting the Italians, they could only win overwhelmingly. It was an enviable psychological position, from which he considered us far more incapable than we really were - a view strengthened during the first hours of battle by discovering that we behaved far more incompetently than the Germans had imagined.

For four days, from 2 to 6 September, Krafft von Dellmensingen moved between Plezzo and Tolmino. He liked the area and found pleasing the information he received about the weakness of the Italian defences. He felt able to express a favourable technical opinion: an offensive along the upper course of the Isonzo was advisable. He telegraphed German Supreme Command accordingly using the code word Waffentreu, "Faithful in Arms". It was the word that gave its name to the operation against Italy: the faithfulness in arms of the two empires against their formerly faithless ally, das treulose Italien. Preparations began.

Time was needed before the details of the offensive plan took definitive shape. In the end, the Austro-Germans chose a double manoeuvre along two breakthrough axes. The principal attack from the Tolmino bridgehead would first aim at Monte Jeza and Krad Vrh and then advance rapidly westwards. A subsidiary attack from Plezzo towards Saga would attempt to separate the Carnia XII Corps from the Second Army. The objective was the Tagliamento, and therefore the capture of Cividale and Udine. They did not dare hope for more: positional warfare had left its mark even upon the most professional General Staff in the world.

By mid-September 1917, the Austrian forces between Monte Rombon and Selo on the Isonzo consisted of the 93rd Division and XV Army Corps, the 1st and 50th Divisions. The 93rd Division, renamed the 55th, was joined by the 3rd Edelweiss and 22nd Schützen Divisions, both from Trentino, together with the Jäger Division, formed from German battalions of various origins. These four divisions, united in an army corps, were placed under General Krauss and deployed from Rombon to Monte Rosso.

On their left was inserted Group Stein [24], composed of the Bavarian Alpine Corps, which came from the Carpathians and had the strength of a powerful division, the Austro-Hungarian 50th Division, the Silesian 12th from Alsace, and the German 117th Division transported from the Russian front. The German 200th Division also came from there. Together with the 26th Württemberg Division, withdrawn from Flanders, it formed Group Berrer, deployed opposite Jeza. The final army corps assigned to the offensive, the Austro-Hungarian XV Corps, remained under General Scotti, who already commanded it, and after reorganisation consisted of the Austro-Hungarian 1st Division and the Prussian 5th Division.

General Krauss's divisions were assigned the subsidiary breakthrough at the Saga defile. Group Stein had the more complex task: it was to break the line from Monte Nero to Vodil, advance along both banks of the Isonzo valley towards Caporetto, and capture the Kolovrat chain. Group Berrer was assigned Monte Jeza, while Scotti was to force Krad Vrh.

These forces were operationally united into an army designated the mixed Fourteenth Army and placed under General Otto von Below, with Krafft von Dellmensingen as Chief of Staff. Of the twelve divisions forming the Fourteenth Army, eight were assigned to the first assault, while four, all German - the Jäger, 117th, 25th and 5th Divisions - were kept in the second echelon.

Von Below too was a proven warlord with an exceedingly impressive record, having moved successfully from the Eastern Front to the Balkans and the Western Front, gathering an irreplaceable harvest of experience.

South of the Fourteenth Army, from Selo to the sea, the Isonzo Army Group remained deployed with twenty-one divisions, still led by Marshal Boroevic. Three Austro-Hungarian divisions in the rear of the Fourteenth Army formed the reserve of the south-western front - the Austrian name for the sector from Monfalcone to the Asiago plateau - under the nominal command of Archduke Eugen. The left wing of the Second Isonzo Army, attacking in the Lom area, would assist the Fourteenth Army's breakthrough, while the First Isonzo Army would conduct local attacks on the Karst between Faiti and Castagnevizza to keep the Italian Third Army engaged and delay any withdrawal for as long as possible.

The Austro-Germans were not preparing a colossal effort. After deducting the divisions already present and those transferred from other parts of the Italian front, no more than ten major formations were newly arriving, only half of them from the Russian front. Italian fears in certain circles that the Austrians were preparing to recall large forces from Russia against Italy were therefore unfounded.

Nor was the area selected for the offensive the most favourable. Not taking advantage of the Trentino salient, Hindenburg had said - and he understood these matters - was almost nonsensical. But there was not enough time to pack a sufficient number of troops into it before the winter season, which began early on those summits. Another exceedingly dangerous breakthrough axis lay in the southern Karst. Once that area was crossed, the Italian army would be separated from the sea and its principal supply lines and the Third, Second and Fourth Armies, together with the Carnia XII Corps, would be driven back against the Alps. But the Italian defence on the Karst was particularly dense, and tactical success uncertain.

This latter hypothesis nevertheless clouded General Cadorna's judgement so far that, assuming the enemy to be more cunning and powerful than he was, he came to believe the offensive from Tolmino might be a feint and the true attack could take place on the Karst.

Austria's available forces were in fact limited and the German reinforcements were lent for no more than a few months. It was therefore necessary to choose a portion of the front which, although not ideal strategically, was so weakly defended as to guarantee a lightning breakthrough. Once this had been achieved, even mediocre strategic possibilities could be exploited profitably. These were the reasons for choosing the sector between Rombon and Selo, which possessed the additional advantage of extending for about ten kilometres around Tolmino on the right bank of the Isonzo - the last strip of ground in whose name the Austrians could still boast of calling the forces deployed on the Julian front "Isonzo Armies".

The allocation of weapons and matériel was more generous than that of troops. Had coal and iron been edible, the Central Powers would not have starved. The Julian front was enriched with much artillery, aircraft and anti-aircraft equipment. The artillery pieces rose from 1,800 at the end of September to 3,300, together with 650 trench mortars, on the eve of the Battle of Caporetto. On the Fourteenth Army front alone, the number of guns increased from three hundred to 1,600, together with three hundred trench mortars.

Despite these powerful reinforcements, average fire superiority remained in Italian hands. In mid-October, according to the tables published by the Commission of Inquiry into Caporetto, the Second and Third Armies had 3,700 guns and 1,700 trench mortars behind them. General Cablati maintained, moreover, that the tables mistakenly omitted the guns directly subordinate to the Third Army's Army Artillery Command.

On the attack front itself, naturally, the Austro-Germans secured local superiority. Yet it was far from overwhelming, since we opposed 1,200 guns and several hundred trench mortars to the enemy's 1,900 artillery pieces - and the Austrians had always managed very well under far less favourable conditions. If one wished to be meticulous and calculated the respective volume of fire by taking account of projectile weight, it would probably be found to favour us, since the proportion of guns above one hundred millimetres was much higher on our side, whereas our opponents possessed relatively more light artillery.

During three years of exceedingly fierce defensive war in the West, the Germans had inflicted twice as many losses upon their enemies as they themselves suffered, and had critically studied Franco-British methods of attack. They had become convinced that concrete possibilities existed for reviving mobile warfare even upon fronts that appeared hopelessly stabilised.

The abundance of light calibres in relation to medium and very heavy guns was one of many devices. Because light guns permitted faster and more accurate fire, the Germans concluded that it was preferable to place a certain number of small shells upon the target rather than fail entirely to land shells of the greatest calibre. When those enormous projectiles missed the target, they still fell somewhere, digging huge craters and making the ground over which the advance had to proceed even more impassable.

These elementary truths were often forgotten, not to say ignored, by the Entente armies, where the preference was to fire a great deal rather than accurately. The watchword was "saturate the ground" - saturate it until it could no longer be crossed. Lorries, carts, men and even the latest invention designed precisely to travel over impassable terrain, the tanks, became entangled in it. Another argument favouring wider use of light calibres was their greater ease of movement. With tactics and logistics still based largely on horse-drawn transport in combat, it was important not to exhaust men, horses and mules beneath impossible loads.

Nor was this the only novelty the Germans were preparing to bestow upon their unprepared opponents. Italian and Austrian offensives had always been preceded by destructive bombardments of such duration that surprise was necessarily lost, although it was desirable for it to survive at least partly even when the enemy offensive, as almost always happened, had been announced by intelligence services.

The duration of our bombardments in 1917 was so long - we had adopted the same criteria employed by the Allies on the Somme in 1916 - that although the first shell might surprise the enemy, the millionth certainly did not. From the Battle of Verdun onward, by contrast, the Germans had recognised the effectiveness of short and exceedingly violent artillery concentrations immediately followed by the infantry assault. The system, subsequently refined, was finally perfected during the Battle of Riga against the Russians in early September 1917, the final battle on the Eastern Front.

The Italian Command was not materially able to profit from this lesson, given the enormous difficulty of obtaining reliable information amid Russian chaos, although the new tactics were not entirely unknown. Cadorna and Capello had even warned army-corps commanders, though only abstractly, against the German method.

The adoption of short and dense fire was not in itself exceptional. The Germans, themselves late in relation to common sense but ahead of their opponents, had concluded that even fire of unprecedented

violence, involving enormous expenditure of ammunition, could not physically put most enemy batteries out of action piece by piece. Nor was that strictly necessary: it was sufficient to neutralise them for the duration of the assault. Once the breakthrough had been achieved, the artillery would be captured whether effective or not.

A prolonged gas bombardment was more effective as a preface to the brief and intense destructive fire: gas shells spread throughout the entire depth of the enemy deployment, as intense as possible but not necessarily accurate. The cloud of poison gas would force the gunners to put on their masks, in which every movement became exceedingly laborious. If the gas bombardment continued for several hours, the gun crews, unable to endure breathing through the masks for so long, would have to remove them and take refuge in elevated shelters, temporarily abandoning the guns.

Gas fire was heavily affected by weather conditions, particularly variable in the mountains. Once it had begun, it was therefore advisable to hurry. The gas bombardment was fixed at four hours, after which, following a short pause, destructive fire would continue for about one hour.

With the enemy artillery silenced, the infantry and assault units were to close upon the first lines and attack beneath the arc of the projectiles while the artillery lengthened its fire onto the rear positions. Massing the troops very close beneath the enemy was regarded as advantageous, since even if the opponent realised at the last moment the value of opening barrage or interdiction fire, his ability to do so would be limited by fear of striking his own forces.

The assault units had been trained to act with extreme speed. Wherever enemy resistance yielded, they were to infiltrate without concern for their rear or flanks. To provide them with a large volume of fire, they received a generous allotment of automatic weapons, some mounted on motorcycles, and accompanying mortars capable of destroying obstacles of a certain strength. The infantry following the assault units was to widen the breaches already opened without colliding with the hardest obstacles. These would be eliminated later by siege operations conducted by troops specially assigned to the task.

The Austro-Germans had neglected no detail so that this first example of Blitzkrieg might demonstrate the principle's effectiveness to the world. It is well known, however, that no tactical or strategic device is worth more than good fortune. Perfect training, officers' initiative, carefully proportioned gas fire, great density of fire and attack in columns would have been of little use had the attackers not enjoyed two exceptional circumstances: the silence of the Italian artillery, caused not by asphyxiating gas but by precise orders from our own commands; and the fantastical deployment of our troops, who were absent precisely along the attack axes selected by the enemy and perfectly known to us.

Faithful to the most serious requirements of military art, our enemies tried to conduct matters quietly. It was humanly impossible for Italy not to learn of the offensive preparations, but the less she knew, the better. Several hundred aircraft and anti-aircraft guns were therefore concentrated between Tolmino and Plezzo to oppose deep reconnaissance by Italian aviation. Beneath their protection began one of the greatest logistical movements in history.

Within a month, 2,500 trains moved from every part of Central Europe towards the upper Isonzo valley, filling it with men, guns and ammunition. Transporting the shells alone - four million rounds - required five hundred railway convoys. For several days the station at Ljubljana resounded continuously with wagons and locomotives, whose noise metaphorically exceeded that of the battle lines.

In an attempt to deceive us, large German radio stations were installed in South Tyrol and began exchanging dense traffic of false messages to simulate the presence there of a non-existent army. The Bavarian Alpenkorps and other German units ostentatiously crossed the Brenner before moving slowly through the Puster valley and Toblach towards Ljubljana and Krainburg, or were routed through Trieste.

The front-line troops were deployed with great caution and the new guns silently emplaced so that the landscape would not change in appearance to a casual glance. Weapons and men were injected slowly - "drop by drop", General Krafft von Dellmensingen says - chiefly through night movements. The advantage of exact registration upon targets was sacrificed and the number of preliminary shots restricted in order not to reveal prematurely the presence of the numerous new batteries.

This sacrifice was lessened by the fact that the Germans already possessed highly sophisticated firing tables, whose input data included temperature, humidity, atmospheric pressure, and the speed and direction of the winds. Increased accuracy repaid the need for a small scientific laboratory within each artillery group.

Nothing, in short, was omitted in order to do the job well. Even Emperor Karl, who had visited Trent in mid-September, was used as a ruse de guerre and ostentatiously returned to Bolzano less than a month later. He inspected troops, decorated brave men and attended reviews. He was accompanied, the newspapers wrote - although it was entirely untrue - by General von Cramon. The intention was to reinforce the Italian conviction that the coming attack would repeat the Strafexpedition and come from Trentino.

The performance produced little result and failed in its purpose. The Italians received the correct information at the correct time, but did not know how to interpret it.

This could not have been predicted, just as the result of the new German tactics, tested against wavering Russians but not against more solid opponents, was uncertain beforehand. General Krauss himself was seriously concerned when he inspected the Plezzo basin on 20 September. A sense of uneasiness overcame him at the sight of the valley floor through which he was to channel a division and a half. Dominated by the flanks of the surrounding mountains, it lay beneath the fire of Italian artillery whose muzzles projected threateningly from dark caves.

Krauss, like his German colleague Krafft von Dellmensingen, was nevertheless an optimist. He did not limit himself to the minimum hypothesis but also considered the most favourable one: if matters went better than expected, why stop at the Tagliamento? The objective should not be that river but the Western Alps, Lyon and France.

Von Below, aware of Ludendorff's eagerness to have the few divisions reluctantly lent to him returned quickly, possessed no such extensive ambitions. In an order of the day issued on 4 October he definitively established the Tagliamento as the final objective. Nor was he alone in being easily satisfied. The Austro-Hungarian Command was so little convinced that success would exceed expectations that Marshal Boroevic's army group received only five sets of bridging equipment, although it would have to plan a crossing of the Isonzo. It could not reasonably hope to use the permanent Italian bridges, which prudence required it to consider sabotaged and destroyed in the event of a breakthrough.

The doubts of the commanders were matched by those of the troops. The prospect of restoring movement to the war appealed to the German and Austro-Hungarian soldiers. It was also a favourable omen that the commanders expected success to be so rapid that they issued only four reserve food rations, hoping the men could thereafter live upon booty captured from the Italians.

They therefore endured the bad weather philosophically, although poorly protected against it. Yet a secret fear arose from the Italian army's apparent inertia. They knew it was numerous and powerful and were aware of the overwhelming strength of its artillery. The fact that the guns did not react and did nothing to hinder the Austro-German concentration was interpreted ominously. What could be expected from the descendants of Machiavelli, from faithless and treacherous former allies, except traps and

deceit? They did not imagine that the inactivity resulted simply from carelessness; otherwise they would have spared themselves troubled sleep while awaiting the day of trial.

Meanwhile feverish preparations continued, despite inevitable obstacles which infuriated von Below but resulted from the exceedingly tight timetable. Initially fixed for 15 October, the attack had to be postponed to the 22nd and finally to the 24th because poison-gas shells left Budapest late. During the final week the infantry began its last approach towards the front lines.

They were almost all German-speaking troops, a sample of the most warlike stocks: Pomeranian Jäger, Silesian riflemen, Saxons, Bavarian mountain troops, Styrian infantry, Tyrolese of the Edelweiss Division and loyal Carinthians. Filled with propaganda and tempted, like soldiers of every age, by hopes of booty, they were tired of war and eager to fight in order to end it. In their dreams victory had assumed a highly material form: a blessed siesta by the survivors with full stomachs.

Behind these élite troops wound the lice-ridden mass of Austrian territorial soldiers assigned to supply and services, with skeletal horses and ramshackle lorries. The artillerymen, however, were excellent and completed the registration operations within the few available days.

Operation Waffentreu was ready to begin.

Cadorna hastened to inform the Allied commands of his decision to postpone every further offensive action. In two letters dated 21 September he paraphrased for Foch and Robertson what he had already written to the Minister of War, stressing especially the gravity of the reports received during the previous days from the Russian front:

> ... the disintegration of that army, now judged irreparable, [has] altered the picture of the situation. The Italian Supreme Command must seriously consider the possibility that the enemy may, within a relatively short time, concentrate new forces and means in considerable quantities upon the Italian front... Such increases in enemy strength, partly already completed and partly expected, are confirmed by reports arriving insistently from several sources concerning a powerful enemy offensive on the Julian front, an offensive which is already said to be in an advanced state of preparation...
>
> Nor can it be excluded that this offensive may be launched elsewhere than the Julian front and perhaps with the participation of German troops, if account is taken of the reported arrival of the Bavarian Alpine Corps in the Trentino sector...

The defensive, Cadorna concluded, was unavoidable in order not to be caught unprepared "either now or in the spring of 1918".

The changed intentions of our Generalissimo were received badly by his Allied colleagues. Even the French Command attempted to protest, although it had itself adopted the defensive several months earlier, after the Prime Minister had given Parliament a veiled but public announcement. General Foch insinuated that suspension of the Italian offensive might be due more to internal questions than genuine enemy pressure, and considered it advisable "not to suspend but to intensify offensive action and allow His Excellency Cadorna to continue the fine operation now in progress", according to Colonel Papa's telegram from Paris. A new meeting between Cadorna and Foch was suggested by the French War Committee at its sitting of 24 September in an attempt to reverse the conviction of our Chief of the General Staff.

British behaviour was harsher. Cadorna's communication arrived at the wrong moment - although had there ever been a right one? - while the silent and merciless struggle between the Imperial General Staff and Lloyd George was still continuing. As the enraged opponents quarrelled for the hundredth time, one

to stop the dreadful Flanders offensive, the other to continue it at full force until the human resources of the great but not infinite British Empire were entirely exhausted, Cadorna's innocent letter arrived announcing that the Italians were adopting the defensive.

At first Lloyd George was annoyed. He had placed his hopes in Italy and was now disappointed. But he immediately recovered: of course Cadorna was adopting the defensive; the assistance he had hoped for had been stubbornly denied. To Robertson, however, Cadorna's letter seemed a treacherous blow: another man tired of killing Germans and complicating his life by setting a bad example.

Robertson therefore attempted the impossible in order to make Cadorna abandon his decision. Through General Radcliffe, his representative in Udine, he applied direct pressure, reminding our Command that the widely publicised ninety-nine Allied guns had been supplied to support offensive and not defensive plans. He then ventured into prophecy:

> ... It appears to me extremely unlikely that the Austrians intend to attack; and at the present moment, when the enemy speaks so much of peace, it is vitally important that he should be struck hard and without respite...

Robertson applied indirect pressure through the Foreign Office. It was necessary "to insist with the Italian Government that it reconsider the matter", especially since:

> the agreement of the British and French Governments to send one hundred heavy guns from the Western Front, where they are currently lacking [25], was given solely for the purpose of assisting an imminent Italian offensive.

Cadorna telegraphed Sonnino in reply:

> ... As regards the reinforcement of one hundred heavy pieces supplied by the Allies, Your Excellency will agree that I cannot subordinate my general decisions to the presence of these guns upon our front...

At the same time he answered Radcliffe that the decision to assume a defensive posture had been taken "after a calm and careful examination of every element in the complex situation":"

> I am certain that [Sir William Robertson]... will understand the reasons for the decision taken, which has moreover received the full and unconditional approval of the Italian Government...

Sir William refused to understand. Seeing that he could not persist, he became uselessly rude. On 24 September, only a few hours after receiving Cadorna's explanations, he telegraphed:

> Since you have deliberately decided to adopt the defensive, and since the sixteen British howitzer batteries were sent to you for offensive purposes, please arrange for them to be withdrawn from the front immediately, as I need to assign them to another theatre of operations...

General Giardino, who knew the details, retained an indelible impression of deliberate harshness and fully approved Cadorna when, after promptly assuring Robertson that the batteries would be returned, he reminded him "with regard to the form used in requesting them" that he alone was competent to judge the situation on the Italian front and take the necessary measures.

The ninety-nine Franco-British guns that had been in action for five months on the Julian front therefore began the journey home. The 102 French artillery pieces which, after exhausting negotiations, were arriving during those days were stopped halfway and turned back. A final attempt made through the Italian Embassy in Paris to retain those guns failed. Pétain, to whose judgement the politicians appealed, replied that the pieces were indispensable for forthcoming French operations, which never took place.

How lightly the Franco-British treated the concentration of enemy forces on the Upper Isonzo is demonstrated by the fact that Colonel Goubet, head of the Deuxième Bureau [26], although his agents had collected precise information on matters concerning us, neglected to report it to our Colonel Brancaccio, assistant military attaché at the Italian Embassy in Paris.

This did not prevent many Frenchmen, who were ignorant of these details, from reviving the elegant expression cochons d'Italiens - the epithet macaroni being reserved for calmer moments - when we were surprised by the Caporetto rout.

French deliberate negligence would have caused us no harm, because Brancaccio had long since released his own intelligence service inside the French Intelligence Service. But the documents and reports he gathered with so much effort were then piled up in Udine inside the drawer of the head of the Intelligence Office at our Supreme Command, who carefully avoided showing them to Cadorna or presented them to him altered and improved according to circumstances. As so often happened, we were our own most dangerous enemies.

General Cadorna reported these quarrels with the Allied generals to the Council of Ministers convened in Rome on 28 September, which he had been invited to attend.

Prime Minister Boselli intended the meeting to represent the Government's reply to the four letters Cadorna had addressed to him, none of which anyone had deigned to answer. Orlando had opposed a written reply, always favouring an oral explanation. Boselli himself had confirmed this to Cadorna on 1 September, when visiting Udine with several members of the Government:

- You keep saying that you want an answer to your letters. But how can I answer you when Orlando insists on doing things his own way?

With the exception of Ruffini, Minister of Education, the Council was complete. The meeting was rather long. Cadorna, who was given the floor first, described the recent offensive and explained the reasons that led him to suspend it: the shortage of shells, the even more serious shortage of men, and the threatening situation in Russia. He then expressed confidence that an enemy offensive could be contained, provided no serious collapse occurred among the troops, which would have unforeseeable consequences.

But he spoke for more than two hours about something else as well, conducting a kind of trial of Italian psychology and national qualities:

> With regard to the condition of the army, I refer particularly to the inadequate quality of the officer cadres, which grows worse every day. On this subject I say that all armies have been forced to improvise, with the difference that in the Central Empires they build upon a broad peacetime foundation and possess a strong social discipline through which soldiers can easily be improvised. With us the opposite is true, and young people acquire their education by hissing at professors and breaking school benches...

Ours, Cadorna concluded, was the most strike-ridden country in the world, and it was therefore inevitable that we should find ourselves inferior to nations possessing greater civic education.

The ministers were numerous, but Cadorna had only one interlocutor. Vittorio Emanuele Orlando spoke immediately afterwards:

> I began by observing that I did not intend to rely upon a preliminary objection of competence, since the observations made by the Supreme Commander were intimately connected with the general political direction of the Government, so that the commander himself could not be prevented from expressing an opinion...

If Cadorna was dry and excessively concise in his presentation, Orlando restored the average to suitable lawyerly prolixity.

The question, Orlando continued, was wrongly framed if placed in political terms. Every government plainly had the strict duty to combat defeatist propaganda, and he, as Minister of the Interior, had every intention of fulfilling that precise duty. It was difficult, however, to find a means of effectively suppressing this form of propaganda, which escaped repression because no one understood where or how it arose.

There had been letters from the front, passed by the censor, which appeared to be suggested not merely by a common feeling but by a common inspiration. If the Supreme Command - which in the war zone possessed powers incomparably more persuasive than those available to the Minister of the Interior in the rest of the country - could not suppress these manifestations, how could the civilian ministry succeed? Unfortunately, Orlando concluded, nothing could be done and everything amounted to warm compresses.

But was it true that the troops' moral depression resulted only from antipatriotic propaganda conducted by subversive elements within the country? Might it not be powerfully assisted by the fact - Orlando did not use these words, but made his meaning clear - that the Supreme Command was killing too many soldiers too quickly?

These questions were difficult and impolite to answer, all the more because one minister, unwilling to be overwhelmed by general discouragement, had placed his own young son in a safe billet, explaining this unusual conduct by the need not to have worries about the child's health during such difficult circumstances.

The Minister of the Interior had spoken for half an hour. Boselli asked Cadorna whether he wished to add anything and, receiving a negative answer, closed the meeting.

The most obvious contemporary interpretation of Cadorna's silence was that he broadly agreed. Years later Cadorna revealed instead that he remained silent because, not being politically responsible, he did not wish to interfere in matters that did not concern him. For several months Boselli had suspected Cadorna of harbouring nothing less than dictatorial ambitions, and the Generalissimo wished above all not to feed such suspicions.

Those suspicions did not in any case appear outwardly, for Cadorna writes:

> At the Council of Ministers of 28 September 1917... [Orlando] pronounced lofty expressions of praise regarding me in grandiloquent language, while the Prime Minister, Deputy Boselli, on whose right I sat, whispered in my ear that his admiration for me had never been so great as at that moment. I was so little persuaded of the sincerity of these expressions that I neither moved my neck nor bent my back, even to thank them.

However that may be, as they said goodbye General Cadorna addressed Orlando with these words:

- Very well. You make sure of my rear areas, and I shall take care of the soldiers.

The public was naturally given the most mendacious version. Although this was to some extent inevitable, the press account of the meeting is still striking:

> AT THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS CADORNA SPOKE WITH SUCH FERVOUR AND SUCH CONFIDENT FAITH IN THE FUTURE THAT ALL THE MINISTERS SPRANG TO THEIR FEET IN A BURST OF ENTHUSIASM AND ACCLAIMED HIM THUNDEROUSLY. THE MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL WARMLY SHOOK THE GENERAL'S HAND, AND THE PRIME MINISTER EMBRACED HIM, DEEPLY MOVED...

If the order issued by our Chief of the General Staff on 18 September possessed one merit, it was concision and clarity. The continual growth of enemy forces on the Julian front, caused by the worsening situation in which events were moving to the advantage of our opponents, made a serious enemy attack appear imminent and probable. The Second and Third Armies were therefore to prepare for defence to the bitter end and direct the activity of the troops, deployment of artillery and urgency of works in accordance with that "precise directive".

In the Third Army, bled white by futile attempts against the Karst front, the order found prompt obedience and willing execution. It received no equally favourable welcome from the Second Army Command, which still contemplated offensives of broad scope. What caused most concern was the withdrawal of the artillery which had been laboriously dragged onto the Bainsizza during the first half of September. General Capello writes:

> The transport of artillery and trench mortars of every calibre; construction of emplacements; organisation of command posts, observation posts, communications and shelters for the troops; arrangements for ammunition and logistical preparations of every kind require weeks and weeks of methodical, constant, intense and exceedingly diligent work.
>
> In our case this involved tens upon tens of thousands of lorry journeys along difficult roads, often improvised in mountainous terrain, very close to the enemy and therefore requiring movements to be made only at night...
>
> As I have said, by the final ten days of September we had already completed most of this enormous preparatory work.

And now a damned order, to be obeyed out of respect for military discipline - so often blessed but sometimes cursed, according to whether one commands or must obey - wished to undo so much labour, the premise of greater glories, and repeat it not once but three times. After uselessly moving the guns forward, it would now be necessary to move them back and then, once the storm had passed, drag them forward again for the future offensive.

It was therefore better to leave the guns where they were and run the risk. General Capello felt that his army's deployment was almost indefensible:

> What solution should be adopted... if one wishes to remain firm in the defensive concept? Adopt a half measure? Resist in place? Conduct a German-style elastic defence? But were our defensive organisations suited to it? Was the terrain suited to it? Did we possess the necessary depth, especially at the most threatened point, opposite Tolmino? I do not hesitate to answer in the negative. It is useless now to recriminate about what our defensive organisation should have been. Our conduct at that moment had to be inspired by the existing state of affairs, and it must not be forgotten that, especially on the Julian front, the orientation of our conduct had from the beginning of the war been predominantly offensive, and all our organisations answered to that orientation.
>
> Moreover, this concept of elastic defence would always have made an initial enemy success possible, and the enemy would not have failed to exploit it to raise the morale of the country. We could not and must not permit that, for reasons repeatedly stated... To remove this disproportion between the defence and the needs of the moment, it should at least have been integrated with the concept of a great strategic offensive, prepared in good time with adequate means; and this was not done.

Silently entering into controversy with an unsuspecting Supreme Command, Capello began by being a lukewarm executor of the orders he disliked most. In particular, he neglected the order concerning the withdrawal of the artillery, which was moved little or not at all from the positions in which it had been emplaced.

Around 20 September, however, no one yet believed that the enemy seriously intended to launch an offensive aimed at nothing less than the Tagliamento, especially because, against many indications, there were few concrete facts.

General Capello himself had interpreted this "minimum" hypothesis on 17 September, one day before receiving Cadorna's defensive order, during a conference for the commanders of the army corps on the Bainsizza and around Gorizia:

> ... We have learned that while we are preparing the offensive, the enemy is in turn preparing a counter-offensive. Dates have even been mentioned for this enemy operation: the 20th, 22nd or 25th of the present month, certainly before the end of September.

The basis of the report was broadly true, but its proportions were greatly reduced. In the Second Army commander's forecast, it was a modest counter-offensive no more dangerous than those with which the enemy had often taken back part of the advantages painfully gained in bloody battles.

Nor did Capello substantially change his opinion two days later, when, informing the commanders of II, XXIV and XXVII Army Corps of the defensive instructions received in the meantime, he directed that a defensive-offensive concept should now prevail over the previous offensive ideas. The evidence concerning the scale of the enemy attack was still so limited that the commander of IV Army Corps was not invited to the conference of 19 September, although his corps was the one most threatened by the Austro-German plan.

At this meeting Capello instilled very little of the spirit governing the Supreme Command's order. The positions reached, he said, must be continuously and uninterruptedly strengthened. He acknowledged that the artillery deployment was "bold", because it projected no less than beyond the line of defence to the bitter end, so that a modest infantry withdrawal would leave several batteries at the enemy's mercy. But his comment stopped there.

Despite the potential danger, his orders were formulated in such a manner that they could be interpreted elastically:

> ... It is necessary to consider whether the deployment we have adopted is advisable, or whether the artillery placed too far forward should be withdrawn... The concept guiding artillery deployment is to leave forward what is necessary to guarantee the positions and enable us to pass to the counter-offensive...
>
> Finally, I recall that although the defensive concept must guide us during this period, the counter-offensive concept must always remain present in all of us and must be the animating principle.

Everyone knew the Second Army commander's far from gentle, indeed decidedly irascible, character. One may therefore imagine how his subordinates resolved the dilemma of withdrawing the artillery or leaving it in place, considering the obligation to "guarantee the positions" in preparation for the next offensive.

And how was the order to keep within reach the draught animals needed for a possible withdrawal of the batteries to be reconciled with the practical impossibility of watering horses on the Bainsizza plateau? By moving the horse-drawn batteries back towards the Isonzo, where water was available, or by removing the horses from the waterless Bainsizza? Naturally, the animals were removed, risking the temporary immobility of the artillery pieces in the hope that, at worst, there would be enough time to bring the horses back onto the plateau.

At that moment such worries nevertheless seemed highly theoretical, based more upon logical deduction than real facts. But as soon as the Austro-Germans began putting their intentions into practice, reports of

the grand preparations started filtering towards the Italian commands. It was impossible for so large a movement of weapons and men to pass unnoticed.

Rumours of the coming attack travelled by mysterious routes from the populations of Carinthia and Carniola, who could see what was happening, to the Italian population on the other side of the battlefront. Before long all Friuli was crossed by sinister reports. The enemy offensive, considered certain and imminent, became the subject of anxious conversations. It was said that leaflets in Slavic and Italian dropped by enemy aircraft had warned the civilian population that the "liberators" would soon arrive. Some whispered that the Germans, whose presence was taken as certain, numbered one hundred thousand; others two hundred thousand; others half a million.

The Supreme Command's Intelligence Service could not measure the reliability of information against such rumours. But before long the tune coming from its collection centres, especially Milan and Bern, began to sound in the same key. After the sparse reports of late August, which indicated that several Austrian divisions were being transferred from the Russian to the Italian front, the Bern centre was the first, around mid-September, to report persistent rumours of an imminent great Austro-German offensive on the Julian front. From The Hague came information that trains carrying German Jäger were travelling towards Trieste.

At the end of September Bern then announced the formation of a new enemy army, the Fourteenth, composed of elements drawn from various German regions and destined for an unknown front. It was learned that the Silesian 12th Division, resting in Alsace, was being re-equipped for the Italian front. Finally, at the beginning of October, the passage through Ljubljana station of about one hundred trains carrying German infantry was reported as certain.

Precise and alarming reports also arrived from First Army headquarters, which through a fortunate series of circumstances possessed particularly reliable informants within the Austrian army. In mid-September they promptly reported the arrival in Trentino, which was being emptied of Austrian troops, of the Bavarian Alpenkorps.

There was a certain ostentation in this arrival, the informants added, because the intention was to make the Italians believe that the attack would be launched from Trentino as in 1916, although this time it could not be because of insufficient time and means. The establishment and operation of large radio stations at Bolzano and Merano, simulating message traffic as though a great German formation were being installed in South Tyrol, must not deceive anyone. The danger lay and remained on the Isonzo front, towards Tolmino.

Apart from the arrival of the few thousand German mountain troops, none of the other warning signs accompanying an offensive could be observed in Trentino. By contrast, four or five German divisions were reported in transit towards the Julian front.

Collecting reliable information was only the first step towards the truth. The second task was knowing how to interpret it correctly.

Until fairly recent times, before science and technology had come to dominate affairs, important information concerning the enemy was reported directly to the commander-in-chief, who sifted, weighed and interpreted it as best he could in a manner that might be called artisanal. The First World War, however, was already being fought in an age of advanced specialisation. It required a separate Intelligence Office, whose head ordinarily resided in Rome. This organisation in turn extended tentacles towards the armies in the field, the Army Intelligence Offices, which did not always agree with one another or with the head.

More serious still, interpretation of the information was not entrusted to those who collected it but to another bureaucracy supposedly endowed with special competence and sensitivity: the Situation Office. On the basis of the Situation Office's diagnosis, another service, the Operations Office, decided upon the cure, advising battle plans or counter-plans, except when the Operations Office itself combined the duties of the Situation Office.

A short-lived but already firmly established tradition required the Intelligence and Situation-Operations Offices never to agree.

What happened in France at the beginning of 1916 was typical. The Intelligence Service at French Great Headquarters repeatedly announced the arrival of more and more German divisions on the Verdun front. The Operations Office, closer to the Commander-in-Chief, refused to believe the threat: "What nonsense, what foolishness!" When someone persisted beyond what was permissible, fortified by the supposed right to save his own skin when this coincided with the country's interest, the head of the office answered irritably:

- You think they are coming? Then let them come! They will fall nicely!

The Germans came, but it was France that nearly suffered a mortal fall.

There is something pathological in this conflict:

> Operations Offices everywhere had reserved the work of assessment for themselves...
>
> Everyone knows that responsibility defines function, and that the prestige associated with a function depends upon the breadth of responsibility. The modest prestige attached to the Intelligence Office reflected a task regarded as servile. An intelligence officer who remained long enough in his post to perceive certain symptoms with an expert eye was an exceptional case... When an officer remained in Intelligence, it was concluded that he was incapable of performing command duties... [27]

These words do not describe what happened at the Italian Supreme Command in 1917, but the situation in the American services at Pearl Harbor several months before December 1941, when the Japanese attacked the Hawaiian Islands and the American fleet. This shows how readily the vice takes root and how difficult it is to eradicate. Since this was the rule, it is unsurprising that Italy followed it scrupulously and that coherent information produced extravagant conclusions, leading to strange or even counterproductive orders.

Alongside ordinary malfunction, our Intelligence Office suffered its own particular upheaval in September 1917. On the 7th, General Garruccio, who had until then headed the office, was instructed to organise in Rome a kind of national Military Police office and was replaced in his former post by Colonel Marchetti. To simplify his life, Garruccio tempted the best members of the Intelligence Service, with whom he had previously worked, to follow him into the new office. This provoked Marchetti's protests as he attempted to preserve the integrity of the organisation.

Besides the change at the top, several peripheral heads were also replaced. In particular, the former head of the Second Army Intelligence Service was placed in charge of the Bern office. A rigid character, he immediately clashed with his principal collaborators. Accustomed to army intelligence, in which one encountered enemy servicemen whose greatest fault was desertion through fear, he could not adapt to the Swiss environment, where it was normal to deal with spies and other shady figures who sold information for money and with whom his military conscience recoiled from making contact.

Although limping from these recent disorders, the Intelligence Office did not betray the trust placed in it. General Cadorna, who would have had the first right to complain, states:

> Yes, war would be much easier if the Intelligence Service were always capable of dispelling every uncertainty... Taken as a whole, I feel able to affirm that in October 1917 the Intelligence Service, despite several unavoidable uncertainties, functioned extremely well...

The processing of reports within the Situation Office functioned less "extremely well". Colonel Marchetti says it displayed an a priori "prudent distrust of rumours of a large-scale offensive" [28], whether because of the exuberant bodily build of its members or their imprudent desire to please their chiefs, who were said to prefer hearing rumours of an offensive denied.

In any event, the incoming reports do not appear to have caused excessive alarm. Nor did Cadorna become suspicious when he received a copy of the record drawn up after Capello's conference of 19 September:

> The tenor of those words was not... sufficient to make me suspect that General Capello intended to act differently from what I had prescribed in my order of 18 September. Likewise the written phrase concerning the artillery deployment, "to leave forward what is necessary to guarantee the positions and enable us to pass to the counter-offensive", was not of such a kind as to lead me to suppose that, after my clear and peremptory order of 18 September, General Capello still intended to leave all or almost all the heavy artillery forward in order to conduct a large-scale counter-offensive. Had I known, I should have intervened immediately.

Meanwhile reports continued arriving with monotonous regularity: now a prisoner's statement, now a deserter's, or data supplied by a forward artillery observation post. It seemed that the alarm clock had rung for the Situation Office, since its daily bulletin of 28 September stated:

> ... the possibility of enemy offensive operations should not be excluded, although, given the season, they could possess only a diversionary character...

Two days later the same office, almost regretting having attributed such bold intentions to the enemy, folded its previous forecast back upon itself and merely suggested that the recapture of the Selo salient, a piece of San Gabriele or a small summit before San Marco represented the whole of Austro-Hungarian ambition:

> Despite the numerous rumours... it is not unlikely that everything should be attributed to Austrian fear of a renewed Italian offensive like that of last month and to intensive preparations to increase the artillery and assemble reserves on the Isonzo fronts.
>
> German assistance requested by Austria might be limited to a certain number of battalions, enabling a certain number of divisions to move from Trentino to the Julian front.

Capello's interpretation that same day was notably different. In a "most confidential and urgent" telegram addressed this time to IV and XXVII Army Corps Commands, he stated:

> Information from prisoners and various indications would appear to be outlining the possibility of an Austrian offensive beginning from the Tolmino bridgehead and directed towards seizing the head of the Judrio valley or advancing up the Isonzo...
>
> As a precaution, IV Corps Command is to arrange for the 2nd Bersaglieri Regiment to take up a position closer to the Tolmino bridgehead.
>
> The commands receiving this message will also arrange for officers of subordinate units to reconnoitre the rear lines in the threatened sectors.

It was not the first time, but became a constant rule during the following weeks, that General Capello's interpretation of the situation conflicted with that of the competent office at the Supreme Command, with Capello generally much closer to the truth. On 2 October the Situation Office, although it had

meanwhile received reports of German soldiers in the Bača valley near Tolmino, excluded the possibility that an enemy offensive should be feared precisely at Tolmino. At worst, a "local operation" might be expected.

General Cadorna was apparently reassured, all the more because the establishment of very bad weather, with continuous and persistent rain, appeared to favour postponement of the supposed offensive. After returning from Rome and spending several days in Udine, Cadorna left for the Asiago plateau and reached Vicenza on 5 October.

The reason for his departure from the Julian front remained unclear for a long time. The simplest explanation assumed that, misled by reports deliberately spread by the Austro-Germans, he genuinely feared the main offensive would come from Trentino. That hypothesis, however, conflicted with the calm confidence of the First Army Intelligence Office, which denied the possibility of an Austrian offensive in the near future. General Cadorna is moreover explicit: "At that time I believed only in an attack on the Julian front."

Only very recently did Colonel Gatti's posthumous diary reveal that Cadorna went with the Countess to Villa Camerini for a leave intended to provide fifteen days of rest.

He could not have chosen a worse moment. Away from events, he lost his sensitivity to them. He nevertheless used his stay in Trentino to make certain that his rear was secure, and on 7 October reached the summit of Monte Grappa, where for a year work had proceeded tirelessly under an engineer colonel to make the massif habitable and defensible. There occurred an episode which Colonel Gatti relates as follows:

> The officers surrounding the General suddenly heard him say to Colonel Del Fabbro, as though concluding a severe inner argument:
>
> "Take great care, Colonel. Grappa must be made impregnable. It must be exceedingly strong on every side, not only towards the west. Indeed, devote the greatest care to strengthening the front facing north as much as possible. For if, quod Deus avertat, some disaster were to occur on the Isonzo, I should come and establish myself here."
>
> The silence among the listeners became immense.
>
> The General remained silent for a moment and then added:
>
> "Look carefully. There is the Asiago plateau and the Melette; here Grappa; on the right Monte Tomba and Monfenera; then Montello and the Piave. I repeat: in the event of disaster, this is the line we shall occupy."
>
> He then made a resolute gesture, as though driving destiny away. The veil that had torn open upon the future, without anyone knowing it, fell again.
>
> ... Cadorna's words can be attested by every officer who was with him on Grappa, because they remained indelibly impressed upon them all...

His statements were not always so measured and prophetic, however. They oscillated between the cold and illusionless tone of the commander and the disjointedly optimistic voice of a crowd impresario. While visiting the Caldiera lines, he spoke as follows in the presence of a group of Alpini officers:

> If all the trenches on the Julian front were like these, we could laugh at the much-trumpeted Austro-German offensive. Besides, they have enough trouble of their own. On that side too we are extremely well prepared, and with their boasting they merely wish to frighten us.

He added in Piedmontese: "It is all nonsense."

Such phrases, passed from mouth to mouth, limped all the way to Udine, where they exercised considerable influence upon the compilers of the Situation Office bulletin. Since Cadorna in turn read that bulletin, the danger of setting off a harmful feedback loop was by no means imaginary.

This state of affairs concerned Colonel Marchetti, head of the Intelligence Office. After a rapid visit to the information collection centres, he hurried to report to Deputy Chief of the General Staff General Porro what appeared to him the most reliable forecast:

> the offensive was certain;
>
> the most probable date fell in the final ten days of October;
>
> the main effort would begin from the Tolmino basin;
>
> German participation was not yet certain, but forty to fifty thousand Germans were already in the Krainburg basin.

Considering that the conversation took place on 5 October, this was a photograph with exceptionally clear outlines. General Porro showed no surprise at the revelations and declared that every precaution was being taken "to be ready to receive them". Marchetti returned to Rome confident and convinced that in high places the enemy offensive was receiving the respect it deserved.

It is therefore astonishing that the Situation Office bulletin of 8 October judged an offensive on the Middle Isonzo probable, but solely with the purpose of "recapturing all or part of the Bainsizza plateau; local operations on the remainder of the front, with a diversionary character in Trentino. German participation very limited."

That offices bureaucratically so close to one another could reach such different diagnoses from the same evidence was truly surprising. It was not the only surprise that senior and junior, central and peripheral commands would offer Italy during the following weeks.

While during September and the first week of October specific reports concerning the forthcoming enemy offensive did not yet appear threatening, information about the general situation was catastrophic. The United States still seemed distant and legendary, while the collapse of Russia appeared close and terrible. The latest information sent to the Supreme Command by our military attachés allowed no hope.

At the end of August, before returning to Italy from Petrograd, Major Tonelli travelled to Mogilev, seat of the Stavka, the Russian Supreme Command, to take leave both of General Romei, head of our military mission, and General Kornilov, the new and short-lived star of republican Russia. Kornilov told him literally:

- Tell General Cadorna that I shall do everything possible to restore the Russian army so that it may fulfil its duty towards the Allies as soon as possible.

His medicine, the product of an outdated education and a strong dose of illusion, consisted of restoring the old discipline, re-establishing the death penalty, "liquidating" the Bolsheviks and persuading Kerensky, gently or forcibly, to display greater energy. Ministers Savinkov and Milyukov gave further assurances. By the time Tonelli reached Italy, however, the scene had entirely changed: Kornilov's putsch had failed and the General himself had been arrested and threatened with death together with his followers.

Among the many offences charged against him was that of assisting the Germans in capturing Riga. In reality, when von Hutier's Eighth Army attacked the city on 1 September, the Russian divisions fled so rapidly that even the fast-moving Germans were left with only a handful of prisoners. They had preceded the assault with a formidable artillery preparation organised by the outstanding Colonel Bruchmüller, who was acquiring the nickname Durchbruchmüller, "Breakthrough Müller", but discovered that the effort had been wasted. Suspecting that treason was required for Riga to fall into German hands was therefore a sin of optimism.

On 5 September Kornilov himself had spoken candidly to General Romei:

- I cannot honestly say that the situation is good.

Indeed, in a burst of sincerity he confessed that it was "extremely grave both militarily and politically". He then praised the Italian offensive, which had greatly relieved the Russians by forcing the Austrians to suspend their attacks around Focşani in Romania and take up defensive positions. From there, Kornilov continued - with what satisfaction on General Romei's part is unknown - the Austrians had been compelled to withdraw two divisions, naturally sent to the Italian front.

Good intentions were frustrated by the general upheaval and by the suspicion and contempt characterising relations between Kornilov and Kerensky.

On 10 September a funereal proclamation signed by Kornilov was posted in the streets of Mogilev:

> Russian people! Our great Fatherland is dying. The hour of its end is near.

Four days later Kornilov, after vainly attempting to march on Petrograd, was arrested. The new Minister of War, Verkhovsky, repeated his predecessors' phrases with far less authority. An atmosphere of general dissolution was now spreading. General Alekseyev too wished to abandon everything. He told General Romei on 23 September that he was disgusted by the Government's treatment of Kornilov, who was accused of treason and threatened with execution merely because, in agreement with Kerensky, he had attempted unsuccessfully to restore discipline and reintroduce the coercive means required to maintain it, including capital punishment.

To distinguish himself from Kornilov and his reactionary entourage, Verkhovsky had to follow another road. He intended to rebuild the army as follows:

> There are two ways to attain the objective: General Kornilov's brutal and authoritarian method and the persuasive and democratic method adopted by the Russian Republic.

The sailors of the Baltic Fleet promptly adopted the second. When their officers resisted, they threw them into the ships' boilers.

"The Russian army will continue to fight," declared on 6 October the head of the Russian military mission to the Italian Supreme Command. Having lived in Udine for some time, he was unaware that since the beginning of the year one million soldiers of the former Tsarist armies had deserted to the enemy or, more commonly, towards the interior.

At the same time the Russian Intelligence Office in Paris announced that fresh Austro-German attempts to fraternise with Russian troops had been repulsed by artillery fire. It neglected to mention that this occurred because one of the two essential ingredients was disappearing: Russian front-line troops.

Nor could it be denied that in mid-October a German naval squadron appeared off the islands of Dagö, Ösel and Moon in the Gulf of Riga and landed troops without interference. Within two days they occupied the capital of Ösel, creating a permanent and now nearby threat to Petrograd.

All this now mattered little. The insurrection that would give power to the Bolsheviks on 7 November was being perfected. Since the Bolsheviks were willing to grant Germany everything she demanded and was able to take in order to settle themselves firmly in power, threats of a strategic and military nature against them lost almost all importance, as the Germans would learn at their own expense.

The pressure of these dark reports overcame even minds most resistant to discouragement. A psychological state of despondency began spreading through our Supreme Command, leaving General Cadorna alone untouched. A senior officer of the Supreme Command wrote to Luigi Albertini, editor of the Corriere della Sera, on 18 September:

> The news from Russia is absolutely catastrophic, at least according to Romei's telegrams, from which we learn that the Soviet favours a separate and immediate peace. If this is really so, we shall soon have several enemy divisions on our backs...
>
> I believe this is the darkest moment of the war... I also believe, and fear that I am right, that the advisability of continuing the war must be carefully examined by the Allies and especially by us. We are at a critical point and must overcome it well. Whoever holds the reins of government today has a terrifying responsibility, and for my part I am truly anguished and thoughtful about our country's future...

In his confidences to his friend Colonel Gatti, General Porro veered right and left. On 6 September he said that for his part he would be satisfied in Trentino with the Napoleonic frontier, while in the east he considered the frontier on the Karst "secure". Trieste was not even mentioned: this was therefore slightly less than Giolitti's "considerable amount".

On the 17th, however, the same Porro - not a namesake - indicated as possible Italian claims the Brenner, Julian Alps, Istria and the Dalmatian islands. These territories were not to be conquered from Austria but negotiated, offering the Habsburg Empire as compensation what at that moment seemed easy to give away: eastward expansion at Russia's expense. He believed that the Canton of Ticino should also be annexed to Italy, taken from Switzerland, which could compensate itself with Vorarlberg and Tyrol. The Swiss proved disappointing: sounded out on the matter, they "strongly opposed" the proposed brilliant arrangement.

Salandra too was anguished. No longer able to aspire to become the Prime Minister of Victory, he did not wish to be remembered as the man who had set the country on the road to defeat. He believed that Entente politicians should ask whether, without Russia's contribution, the war could still be brought to a victorious conclusion. Every resistance had a limit, he maintained, repeating the point to Giuseppe Antonio Borgese and insisting on the need to examine the possibility of any peace whatever if pacifist tendencies prevailed in Russia. Orlando too guaranteed the country's political stability only if Russia did not make a separate peace.

If America was not introduced into the balance of forces, it was indeed difficult to understand how the Entente, having failed to win with Russia's participation, could now win without her. Confusion of ideas had therefore reached near perfection. At a political meeting in Milan on 13 September, a speaker who judged our military position excellent and solid was followed by another who considered it, if not very bad, at least worrying. The assembly applauded both indiscriminately.

There were naturally hard men, such as Rino Alessi, correspondent of Il Secolo, according to whom: "Rather than return dishonoured, let all Italy bleed to death. Let revolution come, let disaster come. But peace, no."

Neither the army nor the country could any longer be shielded from the gravity of the Russian situation. The army perceived that matters were deteriorating from the slow but continuous arrival of fresh enemy

forces from the Eastern Front. The Austrians themselves informed our soldiers of the sweeping successes achieved there. Captain Castellini wrote to his family on 7 September:

> The Russians, with Riga lost, are absolutely contemptible, and I hope we shall make them pay many of the costs of the war. Last night the enemy shouted the news of Riga's capture from their positions.

Comparing Castellini's view with what General Porro would tell Colonel Gatti a few days later, or with the hidden designs Minister Scialoja had expressed to Malagodi several months earlier:

> We have our cards, and when matters come to a head we may settle our own questions at Russia's expense.

what is surprising is not that a young captain held the same opinions as the highest-ranking authorities and bearded statesmen, but that the highest-ranking authorities and bearded statesmen possessed the same ideas as a young captain.

The real possibility of Russian defection was now accepted as a "working hypothesis" by the newspapers, which did not conceal the danger inherent in the "ideological vodka" distilled and distributed freely by the Red extremists. From one day to the next, therefore, alternating news produced a Scottish shower.

"The influence of the Soviet is declining," the Daily Telegraph reported, for example. Italian newspapers immediately repeated the despatch and added with satisfaction that Russian troops listened with the greatest attention and disciplined enthusiasm to lectures on the Italian war delivered by Professor Zabughin of the University of Rome in Kiev, Rostov and Odessa. How could such diligent classroom attention be reconciled with subversive intentions?

A few days later Russian defection was taken for granted and remedies were already being studied. Why not invite the Japanese to intervene in the European slaughter? They were a wise and courageous people and possessed a great fleet capable of transporting their army to Europe within two months.

Confidence in the future was therefore largely a matter of personal temperament. Benedetto Croce, for example, saw it in rosy colours and wrote in a letter to the Giornale d'Italia of 14 September:

> ... I have a great fear of rhetorical phrases... A fear which, I confess, has diminished somewhat within me after the great benefit Russia has conferred upon us. This is not the assistance her arms supplied... but the fact that through a terrible example she has shown where the overturning of the scale of social values leads. I believe that the example will influence even the Italian Socialists, who, whatever may be said of them, are nevertheless Italians, belonging to a people refined and made cautious by centuries of experience, and would not, I believe, consider it an honour to be called "members of the Soviets".

Croce did not suspect that many Italians, though refined but not made cautious by centuries of experience, welcomed the title "member of the Soviet". His logical virtuosity was therefore no more valuable than the attempts he made, in another article again sent to the Giornale d'Italia, to justify the philosophical meaning of our war, although this conflicted with his neutralist belief of three years earlier:

> [Our army] was definitively redeeming the Italian people from a stigma fifteen centuries old... Even if, so to speak, the present war achieved no other result for us than allowing us to look the other peoples of the world in the face, on equal terms and with heads held high, the gain would be immense, not merely moral but political. Future generations would always bless the generation that sustained it...

At the beginning of that autumn, life in Italy continued as before - better than before.

From the newspapers:

- Safety mask: multipurpose, pocket-sized, hermetically sealed against asphyxiating gas. Advertisement.

- From 1 October, private motor cars prohibited from circulating.

- State of war between Germany and Haiti, 23 September.

- From the rocks of the Karst the Huns under Attila descended upon Aquileia. This was a serial drama which Febo Mari, a highly exempted writer and filmmaker, was publishing in the Corriere della Sera with an almost prophetic vision of the future. By a bold transposition the invading Huns were identified with the Germans, while their ambassador at the court of Ravenna, "the living beast, crooked in the back and breastbone, answering to the names of man and Zercon", was perhaps "the ancestor of the race of German diplomats at the court of Rome". While Honoria, "little sister of Valentinian and daughter of Galla Placidia", enjoyed herself with the guard centurion who "had polluted the imperial bed in her arms", Attila threatened France and Italy in truculent speeches, taking up position, through a fortunate anachronism, among the trenches of the Karst, 23 September.

- The Hotel Quirinale in Rome informs its distinguished clientele that the insidious rumour in circulation - that the Quirinale is German-owned - is false. The Quirinale is Swiss-owned, 23 September.

- A new record for Italian aviation. Captain Laureati flies non-stop from Turin to London: 1,200 kilometres in less than seven hours in an Italian-built aircraft, 25 September.

- Vocational retraining of blind soldiers, 25 September.

- The Milan-Modena cycle race will be held tomorrow morning, 28 September.

- The lard crisis. The potato confusion. Silver coins replaced by one- and two-lire treasury notes, 28 September.

- Peru and Uruguay break off diplomatic relations with Germany, 8 October.

- A military court has sentenced three defendants to execution for high treason, guilty of causing the explosion at the Cengio dynamite works and fires in the port of Genoa, 9 October.

- Plunder and robbery increasing. For the raid upon Cattaro of 4 October, Gabriele D'Annunzio has coined the motto Iterum rugit leo [29], 12 October.

- Satisfactory harvests in Libya, 100,000 quintals. This year's wheat harvest in Italy was ten million quintals below average, 14 October.

- Prime Minister Deputy Boselli has received representatives of the feminist movement, who request extension of the vote to women. The Prime Minister expressed warm sympathy for women's aspirations, 14 October.

- Three members of Parliament have addressed a question to the Minister of War, asking whether the recent provision should be revoked under which wounded soldiers wishing to spend their customary convalescent leave with their families must pay their own travelling expenses, 15 October.

- From Paris: Mata Hari was shot at dawn yesterday, 16 October.

During the Battle of the Bainsizza the Italian troops had behaved with exceptional enthusiasm, all the more unexpected and welcome after the manifestations of restlessness during the months of pause preceding the offensive. Brigades that should have been relieved did not wish to leave; others held in reserve, such as the Regina Brigade, asked to be employed. "The spirit of the troops today is marvellous," Gatti stated on 25 August.

One significant episode may serve as an example. On the Bainsizza, the hut accommodating the officers of a regiment of the Toscana Brigade, recently returned from martyrdom on the Karst, was struck directly by a heavy-calibre shell, with consequences easy to imagine. A soldier spoke for everyone to the army-corps commander:

- Tonight the regiment wishes to go into the line under the command of its own NCOs.

It is also true that this enthusiasm had been artificially pumped up by allowing the combatants to glimpse the possibility that this might be the decisive and therefore final battle. It had been nourished, especially on the Middle Isonzo, by the modest initial success.

When quiet returned and the intoxication of combat ended, each man began brooding over it and once again over his own affairs, past and future. Each time the process began again, matters were worse. Even the Battle of the Bainsizza, however well it had gone, produced the usual results: familiar faces had vanished and been replaced by newcomers, whom there would barely be time to know before dying or watching them die.

The few survivors of the battles of 1915 felt oppressed by premature old age. One wrote:

> By now in the war zone I no longer represent youth as I did two years ago. I see certain little boys passing beside me who inspire pity and admiration at the same time.

After the Battle of the Bainsizza had briefly offered the pleasure of pursuit, interrupted halfway through by the slaughter of San Gabriele, everyone now looked around in bewilderment. After proclaiming to the four winds that "Austria is at the end of her strength" and that "the battle between Idria and Timavo will be the last", something else had to be invented. The army and the country were again showing unmistakable signs of restlessness.

Subversive leaflets were found in ammunition boxes or between the pages of books supplied to soldiers in military hospitals. General Capello was surprised to find them himself when admitted to the hospital at Verona at the end of October. During the final months censorship offices seized bundles of postcards in which soldiers demanded peace at any price and advised their families not to sow, in order to cause famine and thus force the war to end somehow.

Threatening inscriptions calling for peace were found in abandoned military huts, and signs reading "To let to the Austrians" appeared even in the trenches. Circulars thundered unheard against servicemen for wandering about with their tunics unbuttoned, failing to salute superiors or even to rise if they were lying down when an officer passed.

Giolitti told Malagodi:

> Among the popular classes the war is detested. Striking incidents occur. Do you know what happened to Giustino Fortunato? A soldier on leave stabbed him, accusing him of having wanted the war. I learned of it and wrote to him. He answered that the worst thing was that the village supported the soldier and that his family had to remain shut inside the house...

As for the Socialists, Malagodi observed that their attitude was changing for the worse under the spur and encouragement of the Russian Revolution. Orlando answered, not without reason:

- That is also true. But did I perhaps make the Russian Revolution?

The exasperation of spirits was rekindled by a new wave of combing-out. Territorial commands, hospitals and military districts became the field of yet another manhunt. An order dated 7 September spread anxiety among men who believed themselves permanently safe by imposing a fresh general medical examination upon all those born between 1874 and 1899 who had been rejected or marked for re-examination. With each injection of men drawn from safe billets, the army's morale reacted by losing muscular tone.

Strange clandestine associations were said to be forming among the combatants. One of them, a "Front-Line Claims Committee", addressed a special warning "for Italy's honour and salvation" to Minister Sonnino at the end of August:

> ... We demand that within the shortest possible time, while attempting as best may be to preserve Italy's interests without claiming impossible things, a separate peace be concluded. We shall wait until the end of November. Once that time has passed, we shall abandon our arms en masse and... stone all those responsible for this useless slaughter...

They did not know that the Deputy Chief of the General Staff partly agreed with them.

In a circular dated 18 September, General Capello warned against enemy aircraft dropping leaflets over the front lines and rear areas containing exaggerated reports of the Turin insurrection and other smaller disturbances. On 14 October the Supreme Command urged "continuous and strict vigilance", having heard of a supposed anarchist plot, which numbered itself the thirty-sixth in the series and was said to aim at killing four members of the royal family or Government.

Highly confidential circulars also warned against fraternisation and the danger that the most exposed units might establish tacit armistices with the enemy, during which comforts were exchanged, each side giving what it possessed in abundance and receiving what it lacked.

More dangerous than these irrational manifestations, when they were not genuine inventions, was the fact that doubt was also taking possession of men who should have displayed impassive and serene faces. Doubt and mistrust had infiltrated not only the rank and file but higher levels too, reaching officers with generals' braid. Faced with soldiers physically impaired and morally devastated, the officers began to bend.

Deputy Gasparotto relates:

> ... There are generals who at table, in the presence of subordinates, do not hesitate to discuss the "doubtful Italian character of Trieste"; others who make it perfectly clear that, after all, Russia was right to put an end to the war; still others, respected writers on military matters attached to high commands, who for love of academic argument, almost without realising it, engage in systematic defeatism during the operations themselves while the poor infantrymen lie beneath the enemy wire; and very many who treat volunteers with open suspicion and sometimes with deliberate and ostentatious harshness.

Major Fiore of the engineers, later killed in the Battle of the Piave, entered the following drastic judgement in his diary under 6 October:

> Modern war is science at the service of thieves and murderers.

Military chaplains, insensitive to the reputation as undertakers they were thereby acquiring, tried instead to console simple souls by reminding them that "sooner or later we must all die".

Many commanders found an alibi for defeatism in the soldiers' morale. They themselves were still willing, they maintained, but the soldiers no longer were and refused to fight. Artillery Captain Flores recalls the many discussions raging around Castagnevizza in mid-September:

- Did you see, a colonel said to him, what happened on the 4th in the attack at Castagnevizza? While our division attacked, the troops of the division on our right did not move, and the brigade that carried out the assault paid with many dead and a great number of wounded!...
- Yes, I saw it. I took part in that operation. But I believe that speaking in this way does an injustice to our soldiers!
- Nonsense! Our soldiers no longer fight. They are too tired!

The one institution functioning with its customary meticulous precision was military justice. Increasingly severe circulars continued to rain down and were put into effect with the bureaucratic punctiliousness for which Italy is rightly famous. The most unbelievable things consequently happened, such as this episode related by the military chaplain Don Bonini:

> This morning [20 October] I was called to assist several poor soldiers who were to be shot. While the group of unfortunate men waited for the firing squad, the King arrived. The condemned men threw themselves at the entrance to the gallery and, on their knees with arms outstretched, begged for mercy. The King ordered his aide to take their names so that they could be communicated to the military court and their sentences cancelled. But one of them, who had not noticed the King's arrival and remained screaming with his face in the mud, was not included on the list. He was therefore shot.

Thus matters continued until the black-crossed shadow of the German divisions stretched across the Julian front. When defeat came, the mediocre and cowardly spirit displayed by the troops during the preceding month was cited as decisive proof that matters could not have gone otherwise because of the soldiers' cowardice or treason. Some forgot and others pretended to forget that dissatisfaction always emerged most strongly during pauses in operations.

The beginning of active operations generally coincided instead with the resignation of combatants accustomed, through conditioned reflex and with rare exceptions, to do their duty. The same thing had happened in France during and after the mutinies of May and June, on a much larger scale than on the Italian front. The Germans had not even noticed those mutinies, so weak was the connection between the rebels and the enemy.

There are indeed indications that, through a strange psychological reflex, the Austro-German threat had a beneficial effect whose fruits were gathered behind the Piave and after the retreat. Dismay and suspended fear gave way to looking around in search of solidarity, taking one another by the hand and offering mutual comfort. The danger enabled some units to rediscover unity of purpose with their commanders, at least with those who seriously attempted to keep their soldiers informed of the enemy preparations.

Not all commanders did so, thereby violating explicit orders from the Supreme Command and Army headquarters. Through laziness, fatalism or scepticism about the usefulness of instructing their men, some leaders failed in this duty and left their troops at the mercy of themselves and uncertain thoughts.

Despite the alarming information reaching it, the Situation Office of the Supreme Command, after studying its reliability, decided to exclude the possibility that the enemy was organising a major effort against Italy. An offensive, perhaps, but with limited objectives, defined on 7 October [30] as an attempt to "recapture all or part of the Bainsizza plateau", with probable but "very limited" German participation.

This reassuring assessment was less optimistic than the one formulated the following day by General Capello in a confidential circular to every army-corps command, in which he declared there was no serious argument for considering the enemy intention to attack Italy certain.

Nevertheless, Capello continued, it was necessary to prepare for events through a defensive plan consisting chiefly of counter-attacks by reserve troops, which, rather than being placed in immediate support of the front lines, were to be manoeuvred so as to "grip the enemy in pincers wherever he has broken through". Near and distant barrages prepared in the smallest detail, "so that execution may be instantaneous when required", would extinguish Austro-German ardour at birth.

None of these provisions contradicted the order issued by the Supreme Command on 18 September. In the second half of the letter, however, General Capello's thought underwent an abrupt reversal, partly revealing his hidden wishes:

> It must not be forgotten that an enemy offensive which has been checked and paralysed may often provide a favourable opportunity for a greater counter-offensive action. This may be all the more true at the present moment, when we possess considerable moral superiority over the enemy.

This "counter-attack to be pressed home", after the enemy offensive had been "checked and paralysed", was no small affair. In Capello's intentions it included reaching the mountain edge overlooking the Chiapovano valley, encircling San Gabriele and occupying the Groviglio before Vertoiba: in short, setting the whole Second Army in motion again.

Only IV Corps, still deployed on the extreme left, was to adopt a more strictly defensive posture, "except to cooperate more directly with XXVII Corps in meeting enemy offensive action that might begin from the Tolmino bridgehead". Whether to persist in such counter-offensive actions was left to the judgement of the corps commanders, bearing in mind - "and I say this confidentially to them alone" - the grave shortage of infantry replacements and the need to save ammunition "so that a large reserve may be available when we launch the new great offensive".

Capello did not specify when this "new great offensive", which lay beyond the counter-offensive that would itself follow the enemy offensive, was to occur. Like every good planner, he attempted to mortgage both the near and distant future. In closing he again insisted upon one concept:

> It is necessary, as I have repeated on other occasions, that everything be arranged so that the mechanism of defence and counter-offensive, in full cooperation between artillery and infantry, may operate automatically even if enemy fire should destroy every means of communication.

Despite the reference to counter-offensive action, General Capello had not fully expressed his intentions in this letter. He explained them without concealment only two years after the war:

> The Second Army commander's conception may be summarised as follows:
>
> In obedience to the fundamental principle of military art that every defensive action must be considered transitional, in preparation for launching a counter-offensive at the appropriate moment, Army headquarters fixed upon the idea of supplementing the defence to the bitter end prescribed by the Supreme Command with a powerful counter-offensive to be unleashed in a direction capable of paralysing the enemy attack at the beginning of its development.

This counter-offensive capable of "paralysing the enemy attack at the beginning of its development" was therefore something more than counter-offensive actions to be unleashed once the enemy offensive had been "checked and paralysed".

The thought that Capello intended to supplement the Supreme Command's order for defence to the bitter end with a counter-offensive simultaneous with the enemy's attack did not at the time enter General

Cadorna's mind. It offended the most elementary military discipline for subordinates to "supplement" their superiors' orders without seeking approval. Capello's letter, sent to Cadorna for information while he continued his stay in Trentino, therefore received his agreement:

> I could not fail to approve this concept, which in no way contradicted my order of 18 September. The subsequent counter-offensive would be considered later in accordance with the result achieved by the defence, employing the Army reserves and those at the disposal of the Supreme Command. In the meantime, however, it was necessary to subordinate organisation of the counter-offensive to that of the defence to the bitter end, as I had prescribed in the order of 18 September, which was never revoked...

Meanwhile ever more detailed, but also more difficult to interpret, information arrived concerning the enemy preparations. On 9 October the Milan section of the Intelligence Office summarised the reports received during the previous days as follows:

> Signs of enemy activity: closure of frontiers; suspension or reduction of passenger trains; delays in the postal service; suspension of military leave. These indications correspond to actual reports or confirmation of military rail movements towards our front or rear areas, transport and presence of Germans: the Alpenkorps, whose present location is uncertain, and the 12th, 14th and 26th Divisions.

The Bern centre could present similar documentation, although some of it came from enemy sources and was studied with suspicion that it might be fabricated. The First Army Intelligence Office, less fearful of deception because it enjoyed the invaluable advantage of secret contact with several Czechs serving in Conrad's group, reached the same conclusions.

The head of that office was able to confirm directly to General Cadorna that the few German battalions recently arriving in Trentino were being held there for demonstration, while the true storm gathered on the Julian front near Tolmino. The First Army's fortnightly report, compiled on 10 October, stated literally:

> The advanced season, the failure of artillery to arrive and various other indications and reports allow the Office to exclude any intention of a serious enemy offensive in Trentino, all the more because the German forces present are barely sufficient to maintain a normal defensive situation.
>
> It is to be expected that, if the enemy succeeds in developing his offensive action on the Julian front, he will support it with a demonstrative action on this front.

Two important fragments of the mosaic in which enemy intentions were taking shape had meanwhile fallen into the hands of the Second Army Intelligence Office. On the afternoon of 6 October an artillery observation post succeeded in seeing a column of five hundred lorries winding towards Santa Lucia. Five kilometres of lorries was a great deal for a sector that had until then been relatively lightly held, and also in relation to the Austrians' limited stock of motor vehicles.

During the night of 8-9 October, an operation near the Lom positions captured a Serbian officer-cadet corporal with strongly anti-Austrian feelings. Under interrogation he willingly related everything he had seen and heard, giving the interrogators the impression that he was completely sincere. He reported German headquarters at Bischoflak, construction of new aircraft hangars, more frequent train movements and the emplacement of fresh artillery.

He admitted that he had not personally observed German infantry, but confirmed that the "powerful offensive" being prepared was widely discussed in the enemy ranks and that he had heard its beginning was fixed for 19 October.

All this led Capello to telegraph the Supreme Command on the same day, the 9th:

> The vague but consistent reports collected during recent days concerning enemy preparations for a major offensive on the Army front have been confirmed by deserters and prisoners captured yesterday. The presence of German troops may now be regarded as established...

Capello immediately summoned his army-corps commanders and the commanders of the artillery and engineers to Cormons. General Cavaciocchi, who had been granted leave on the 7th, was recalled by telegram.

Within only twenty-four hours Capello's opinion had changed radically. The enemy's intention to attempt a major offensive against our front was no longer an "improbable possibility", as he had believed the previous day, but was becoming increasingly evident and might materialise within eight or ten days. It was therefore urgent to agree upon how to oppose it.

He began revealing his plan, still a reticent mixture of defence to the bitter end and counter-offensive, but one in which the counter-offensive component was acquiring form and substance.

Capello admitted that our artillery deployment was excessively offensive. The heavy artillery was still projected too far forward and had to be withdrawn quickly and replaced by light batteries. As for the enemy, he formulated two principal hypotheses concerning his intentions, suggested by the concentration of forces both against XXVII Corps and the right of IV Corps, and against II Corps and the left of VI Corps. The pivot of the counter-offensive manoeuvre should therefore be concentration of adequate reserves in the Vrh basin within the sector held by XXIV Corps.

There was, however, a third possibility:

> The enemy's maximum programme might also include a strategic operation from the Tolmino bridgehead in the direction of Cividale, intended to seize the mountain junction at the head of the Judrio valley and thereby turn our lines on the left and right banks of the Isonzo.
>
> It is known that this possibility has already been studied thoroughly and that our defensive works were designed precisely to meet it. His Excellency Badoglio, who knows the defensive problem in the region of his Army Corps thoroughly, is to study in detail the measures for checking such an offensive and report to me...

Without suspecting that, guided only by intuition, he had outlined a good approximation of the enemy's choice, Capello went on at length recommending that matériel and weapons not indispensable immediately behind the front lines should be removed from the territory on the left bank of the Isonzo. He then returned to the importance of communications. Defence, he warned, was a reflex action:

> If the inevitable delay resulting from the enemy's initiative is joined by the delay caused by inadequate organisation of communications, breaches cannot be contained and counter-attacks cannot be launched. Organisation counts for more than genius...

Capello did not foresee that in this too he would prove an excellent Cassandra. His fears that the troops' preparation was unequal to the difficulties ahead were equally justified. The medicine he prescribed was inevitably a strong dose of exercises:

> The troops are to be accustomed to marching on and off roads, in darkness and silence. Communications are to be studied between forward and rear lines, between parallel columns, and between infantry and artillery.

Night manoeuvres consequently became one of the fundamental themes of Second Army training. The available days were few, although no one knew this with certainty, and the incomplete results of these exercises were disputed. Officer cadet Felice Troiani of the Arno Brigade summarises the benefit of those conducted by his unit:

> ... To practise the new employment, the entire regiment conducted complex night manoeuvres resembling grand games of blindman's buff. After a couple of hours we had lost our orientation and communications and no longer knew who we were or where we were going. We groped through the darkness until, in the light of dawn, we recognised one another, found the assembly points again and were told that everything had gone well.

Together with Capello's letter and telegram, General Cadorna received a copy of the summary of the conference held by the Second Army commander on the 9th. He glanced over it, failed to notice the difference from the letter of the previous day, and in particular did not observe that Capello described his artillery deployment as "still too bold", although twenty days had passed since Cadorna's order of 18 September.

In his posthumous memoirs Cadorna admits - it has been observed that this was the only admission of error he ever made - that, in order to remove every possible ambiguity, he would have done well to "supervise General Capello more closely" and verify the execution of his orders. It was in Cadorna's trusting nature, however, to rely upon others without checking, and he did so on this occasion too, not foreseeing that he would be severely reproached for it.

Since the Intelligence Office continued to report the possibility of an enemy offensive, with the last ten days of October suggested as the most probable date, he thought it advisable to draw General Capello's attention to several points to which he attached "capital importance". In a letter written that same day, 10 October, he agreed that an enemy offensive on the Second Army front was possible and especially that it was necessary and urgent to provide adequately against it. For this purpose Capello's directives of the 8th "answered well".

After this phrase, which contributed greatly during the following days to confusing understanding between the two men bearing the greatest responsibility, came a list of four strictly defensive instructions:

> 1. Defence of the forward lines is to be entrusted to small forces, placing justified reliance upon machine-gun action, artillery barrages and interdiction fire, and organisation of flanking fire.
>
> This principle must receive broad and appropriate application in the area north of the Avscek, where the limited defensive effectiveness of the positions advises an extremely sparing use of troops, under penalty of sterile exhaustion of the defence's energies. XXVII Corps must therefore place the greater part of its forces on the right bank of the Isonzo.
>
> 2. So that no event, including the most improbable, may catch us unprepared, only the most mobile medium-calibre guns are to remain on the Bainsizza plateau. Even for these, suitable means for timely and orderly withdrawal in the worst case are not to be neglected.
>
> 3. During enemy bombardment, besides fire upon the localities where troops arrive and assemble, the headquarters and observation posts, and so forth, our own extremely violent counter-preparation is to be conducted.
>
> The fire of heavy and medium calibres is to be concentrated upon the probable zones through which the infantry will break in. Exposed in improvised lines possessing few or no shelters to one of the deadliest torments, they must be crushed upon their starting lines. In a word, it is necessary to disorganise and annihilate the attack before it is launched, a disorganisation and annihilation certainly permitted by our powerful artillery deployment.
>
> 4. The enemy customarily launches his infantry after a very brief preparation of fire. This possibility is to be borne in mind, and artillery and infantry must remain vigilant and ready at every moment to anticipate and repulse the attack. I shall be pleased to receive assurances concerning the various

> questions raised here.
>
> Chief of the General Staff of the Army
> Signed: Cadorna

How could Capello's proposed counter-offensive, centred upon Vrh in the territory of XXIV Army Corps, be carried out if the left wing, which risked bearing the greatest pressure, was to place "the greater part of its forces" on the right bank of the Isonzo? Cadorna's instructions were plainly ill suited to the plan of counter-offensive action which his lieutenant had declared in his letter of the 8th that he intended to unleash "once the enemy offensive had been checked and paralysed", but which in his own mind was to be simultaneous with the offensive itself.

While Cadorna drafted his letter in Vicenza, General Capello reported sick. He had been confined to bed since 4 October, when an attack of nephritis, resulting from the exertions to which he had subjected himself during the Battle of the Bainsizza, struck him unexpectedly. From bed, more or less, he continued to issue orders and direct his army. As the illness worsened, however, the doctors persuaded him to observe more complete rest. General Montuori temporarily replaced him, although Capello continued to reside at Cormons.

Cadorna's letter of 10 October was received by the new commander, who, as customary, transformed it into an order issued on the 11th. Intended as a supplement to the provisions issued on 8 October - and not to the conference of the 9th - it nevertheless contained two important variations from the Generalissimo's instructions.

It spoke of lightening our front-line forces in the area north of the Avscek. The phrase was itself sibylline, since it did not ipso facto require most of XXVII Corps to be transferred to the right bank of the Isonzo, but could be understood merely as an invitation to deploy the three divisions operating on the Lom positions in depth. The explanatory instruction, "XXVII Corps must place the greater part of its forces on the right bank of the Isonzo", was omitted.

With regard to removing the heavy artillery from the Bainsizza plateau, the order was modified as follows:

> ... the few siege batteries deployed on the Bainsizza plateau are to be withdrawn to the edge of the plateau behind the artillery protection line, and similar arrangements are to be made for most of the heavy field pieces.

The distinction between more and less mobile batteries consequently disappeared. All were indeed withdrawn, but still kept on the left bank of the Isonzo.

Since the order bore General Montuori's signature, Capello might have disavowed it and placed responsibility upon his replacement had he not himself admitted that, during Montuori's interim command, he continued from his bed to give advice and hold conferences. Colonel Cavallero, attached to the Supreme Command, testified before the Commission of Inquiry into Caporetto:

> From what I personally observed, General Capello, although indisposed and although he had transferred command to another man, followed events closely and through his presence determined the course of action. Nor did his health, which was not grave, prevent him from doing so, supported as he was, moreover, by his exceedingly strong constitution.

Capello nevertheless maintained that he lacked the physical possibility of exercising direct control, since in that condition he could give only directives of a general character, although they were "clear, precise and characterised by great continuity of conception":"

> Executive orders and control naturally belonged to the Interim Command. But I cannot and do not wish to raise even the slightest doubt concerning the honest, harmonious and consistent action of my direct collaborators...

Proof of this, Capello continues, was that the order to withdraw the heavy batteries to the western edge of the Bainsizza plateau - an order he claimed to have given personally, and which therefore included the variation from the Supreme Command's wording - was scrupulously obeyed by General Montuori. He said nothing, however, to justify omitting the phrase "XXVII Corps must place the greater part of its forces on the right bank of the Isonzo", the more important of the two Cadorna provisions that, in Senator Albertini's impression, had been "completely and deliberately suppressed". The suspicion arises that this latter phrase was omitted at someone else's suggestion, with Capello himself aware of it although not an enthusiastic accomplice.

Cadorna could easily have recalled his subordinates to more scrupulous observance of his intentions had he received a copy of Montuori's directives. But because these already represented, or should have represented, the codification of his own orders, they were not sent to him for information; nor is it known whether he received the assurances he had said he would be "pleased" to receive.

Between 18 September and 11 October, therefore, a solid foundation of confusion was laid between the Supreme Command and the Second Army Command. Confusion and misunderstanding were nevertheless cloaked in apparent agreement, as though carefully measured words were being used to veil the elements of discord and construct a unity of thought that existed only in appearance.

Shut inside his overheated room, General Capello tormented himself over the best means of containing the Austro-German attack. His illness caused serious insomnia, so he had time to reflect by night as well as by day.

He had no doubt that the best means of defending was to attack. In his view, defence to the bitter end was a delaying tactic suitable for Fabius Maximus, but not for Scipio. He felt himself more Scipio than Fabius. Besides, he said, quarrelling with a consul dead for two thousand years, even Fabius Maximus, had he not died too soon, would have been forced to change his mind.

In this spirit Capello had always replied to subordinates who pointed out the need to reinforce the forward lines:

- Do not worry. Before long we shall build stronger ones beyond, beyond Tolmino.

To his mind, halting preparations for the second round of the Battle of the Bainsizza merely because an enemy offensive was expected made no sense. The excuse that too many men and too much ammunition would be consumed was invalid, because both would have to be consumed in any event, even if the initiative came from the enemy. If instead we launched a timely offensive and caught the Austro-Germans during a crisis of preparation, success might easily smile upon us. The enemy challenged us? We would accept the challenge and take the bull by the horns. We would give them a thorough beating.

What did the manoeuvre consist of? It was very simple:

> The Bainsizza salient was to be exploited in order to launch a powerful and overwhelming attack in strength against the flank of the enemy operating from the Tolmino basin towards the Santa Maria and Santa Lucia bridgeheads.
>
> The Army reserve would rapidly assemble in the Vrh basin, an excellent concentration area within immediate reach of the attack front.

But what did Cadorna think of it? Letters, as everyone knew, were a poor means of understanding one another. Capello had not done everything possible to clarify the misunderstanding; he had behaved like

a cuttlefish, releasing ink. Cadorna, however, had not made much effort to understand or make himself understood either. "I agree with this Command", and so forth, followed by a long procession of strictly defensive provisions.

What meaning, for example, did the order have to leave only the most mobile medium calibres on the Bainsizza, and then require counter-preparation fire by medium and heavy calibres against the probable zones through which the enemy infantry would break in? Was it true that Cadorna referred specifically to the Bainsizza when he described the enemy lines as improvised and possessing few or no shelters? Only on the Bainsizza had the enemy been forced to abandon trenches occupied for a long time and take refuge in others that were more or less improvised.

But did Cadorna really mean this? Or did he intend more generally that the enemy, having to concentrate many more troops than normally held that inaccessible region, would be forced to cram them into the attack trenches, as had happened so often during Italian offensives, without particular reference to the Bainsizza positions?

Capello, who had stretched Cadorna's instructions beyond what was permissible, was uncertain that he had acted correctly. Seeking formal agreement where no substantial agreement existed could be dangerous. He was too experienced a general not to remember that many famous military disasters had resulted from subordinate commanders attempting to be clever. Nor did he intend to deceive his commander, but merely to give him time to reconsider and convince himself that defensive strategy was sterile and dangerous, whereas Capello's own proposal shone with certain success.

It was therefore necessary to speak with Cadorna as soon as possible, directly and not by letter. Correspondence continued to confuse ideas.

Capello picked up the telephone and requested a connection with Udine. He was to be placed immediately in contact with the Deputy Chief of the General Staff, General Porro. Capello asked Porro where Cadorna was. Still in Vicenza. When would he return? In about a week. A week would be too late to tell him what lay in Capello's breast. Communication was urgent.

Capello was nevertheless ill enough not to feel capable of travelling all the way to Vicenza. From Cormons to Udine, perhaps, gritting his teeth; but no farther. Perhaps a conversation with General Porro would be sufficient. It was true that the Deputy Chief of the General Staff had always kept aloof from military questions. He chiefly limited himself to bureaucracy and to acting as grand master of ceremonies for Italian and foreign pilgrims visiting the front. Yet he was better than no one.

Capello wasted no time in deciding that drawing the tooth would remove the pain. His meeting with General Porro took place that same day, 11 October. The Second Army commander outlined his counter-offensive plan. If the enemy attack developed, he intended to attack with XXVII Corps towards the Lom positions at Tolmino. He therefore had to retain on the left bank of the Isonzo a "suitable" quantity of artillery which could not all be withdrawn to the other side.

There was also the fear, rumours were beginning to say, that the enemy might extend the attack as far as the Plezzo basin. In that area the influence of a counter-offensive directed against Tolmino could not be felt. Capello should therefore receive as reinforcements one, or preferably two, Alpini groups to place at the entrance to the Saga defile.

The conversation with General Porro produced no result. No reply came from Cadorna, and General Capello remained a prisoner of his doubts and wishes, which illness, through an understandable psychological contrast, inflamed rather than calmed.

But was it even true that the enemy would attack? The Situation Office still inclined to believe that the Austro-Germans were attempting a trick and that the offensive might be a bluff, in which case they would discover someone at the Supreme Command's Situation Office who was cleverer than they were. This is the only conclusion that can be drawn from reading its bulletins.

After the alarm of 8-9 October, the Situation Office's reports showed that its members, having barely pushed their heads out of their shells like tortoises, withdrew them again, almost frightened at having attributed intentions of excessive boldness to the enemy.

The diagnosis issued on 10 October spoke of means prepared by the Central Powers for a stubborn defence which might induce them "to take advantage of the situation and in turn undertake offensive operations, whose scope it is not at present possible to define precisely". The enemy was therefore credited with a plan similar to Capello's. Who knows what would have happened had these really been its intentions: two men glaring and growling at one another, each waiting for an opponent's first movement that never came.

General Cadorna's ideas also had to be taken into account. From Trentino he continued publicly to spread boastful expressions of confidence. In private his boldness was less pronounced, but the Situation Office did not wish to create problems for itself. It was therefore better to make its prophecies coincide with the chief's opinions than to attempt the opposite. This is the sound rule of every age for living and surviving.

On 13 October the Situation Office again attributed offensive intentions to the enemy, declaring them "highly probable and imminent" between Tolmino and Monte Santo, that is, against the Bainsizza. These were not deduced from objective evidence, however, but by pursuing arguments of a general nature open to subjective interpretation: the approaching reopening of the Italian Parliament, the fact - which had certainly leaked out - that we had adopted the defensive, and withdrawal of the Allied artillery. In short, the enemy was credited with a reflex action, as though attempting to exploit a favourable situation at the last moment.

On 16 October enemy offensive operations were regarded as certain "during the final ten days of the month", unless bad weather prevented them. On 17 October, however, the Situation Office once more rocked itself in the most comfortable chair of optimism:

> Since during the past few days a concentration of forces has been observed on the extreme left of our front - numerous trench mortars and artillery in the basin between Tolmino and Monte Nero; steady and battle-tested Austrian troops, such as the 7th Carinthian Infantry Regiment, in the Plezzo basin - while the assembly of German troops appears to predominate towards the Idria and Bača valleys, it does not seem unreasonable to attribute to the enemy an intention to oppose a possible Italian advance with a counter-offensive directed against the left flank and rear of our troops operating on the Bainsizza plateau.

The information gathered, all of it correct, was sufficient to ring even the rustiest alarm bell and agreed poorly with such placid conclusions. One might wonder why Cadorna and Capello did not take a long winter leave while waiting to launch our offensive, which alone, apparently, would set the enemy machine in motion.

Fortunately both men introduced automatic corrections to these optimistic diagnoses. Capello in particular was far more sensitive to reports from his Army Intelligence Office than to the elaborations of the Supreme Command. Although uncertain, the news was hardly reassuring. A vague atmosphere of uneasiness had taken possession of the troops; all Friuli was filled with rumours of the enemy offensive; and the final Austro-German approach movement had not escaped the Italian artillery's observation. On

14 October terrifying traffic jams formed along the road to Santa Maria, where the speed of German motor columns fell to four kilometres a day.

Capello attempted to break the monotony of enforced inactivity by putting his mind to work. On 13 October he explained to Ardengo Soffici how propaganda among fighting units should be conducted. On the 14th he again assembled his army-corps commanders and delivered one of his habitual sermons. General Montuori, as interim commander, had plenty to do attending these meetings, drafting the minutes and issuing appropriate executive provisions. The participants' effort was no small matter either.

General Caviglia writes:

> [Capello] generally held those conferences in the afternoon at Cormons...
>
> His army-corps commanders came from different parts of the front together with their chiefs of staff and artillery commanders, and on that day they could make no dispositions, partly because the conference might produce the need to change the instructions to be issued. During the final days before the attack there were unnecessary conferences. It would have been better to leave the army-corps commanders at their duties. Amid the disorganised succession of orders characteristic of those days, they had no time to consider properly either their own tasks or the consequent orders.

The situation was strange in any event. It was not clear who commanded. Orders arrived signed sometimes by Montuori and sometimes by Capello.

At the meeting of the 14th, General Capello began defining what his instinct suggested the enemy manoeuvre might be. An attack along the floor of the Isonzo valley from Plezzo to Saga was not yet considered. Capello already foresaw, however, that from Tolmino the Austro-German forces might not only attack Jeza frontally but move up the right bank of the Isonzo towards Caporetto, threatening to turn IV Army Corps.

He therefore ordered the 9th Bersaglieri Regiment, reinforced a few days later by the 2nd, to occupy the Plezia-Foni line and bar that possible avenue of penetration.

These measures, together with the arrival of several Alpini battalions for IV Corps, were still insufficient for what was taking shape. Capello did not follow his fortunate intuitions with corresponding decisions. With an enormous army entirely at his disposal, he appeared to believe that reinforcements should be supplied by the Supreme Command, since he had to nail down every available unit for defence of the Bainsizza or for his dreamed-of counter-offensive.

Thus the days passed. Cadorna remained in Trentino, while Capello, unable to move, consumed himself with anxiety but still took no initiative. His attempts to establish direct contact with Cadorna were in any case obstructed by the Situation Office, which, besides compiling meteorological bulletins forecasting fair or variable weather while the hurricane gathered, considered General Capello's practice of communicating directly with General Cadorna "unhelpful to the service". Everything would be more agile, rapid and clear, the Situation Office thought, if dialogue passed through the complex channels of military bureaucracy. Otherwise, what were we here for?

Capello states that on several occasions he implored the offices of the Supreme Command "to inform His Excellency of my condition and ask him to make a dash to my bedside. Everything was useless..."

Capello himself nevertheless avoided an easy means of communicating with General Cadorna through the smallest possible number of barriers: sending his Chief of Staff, General Egidi, who knew his ideas well, to Vicenza. Perhaps Capello feared that Egidi might be manoeuvred or talked round by the Supreme Command, whereas if the others came to him, he felt on safer ground and better able to impose his own thinking.

Having requested a second meeting with General Porro in order to begin implementing his ideas, Capello accepted, since Porro was prevented by previous commitments, a delegate who would report to the Deputy Chief of the General Staff, who in turn would report to Cadorna. The messenger appeared on the afternoon of 15 October in the person of Colonel Cavallero [31].

After expressing regret that he had been unable to speak directly with the Generalissimo, Capello told him that, according to the information available, the enemy offensive could not begin "before the third ten-day period of the month, and more probably towards its end". It would be preceded by prolonged gas fire extending to the farthest rear areas - day by day another piece of the enemy plan was being pasted onto what was already known.

He requested artillery, motor vehicles, motorcycles, aeroplanes and replacements to restore the most exhausted battalions. As for the counter-offensive manoeuvre, he explained that he was training the Sassari Brigade, transformed into an assault brigade together with six Arditi battalions, for inclusion in the manoeuvre mass.

Colonel Cavallero reported:

> General Capello repeated that he regarded a resolute counter-offensive as the surest means of repelling the enemy attack, and that he intended to develop it from the Vrh basin, which he described as the "city of the counter-offensive". Possible directions for this counter-offensive were, on one side, Veliki Celo and beyond [towards Idria], and on the other Ravnica [towards the Ternova plateau]...

To complete the manoeuvre and ensure at the proper moment the "lightning character" of the counter-offensive, Capello requested, in addition to what he already possessed, an army corps of three divisions to be placed behind the Monte Jeza region. He also confirmed that, in order to smother the enemy attack at birth by pounding its starting positions, he was compelled to keep the heavy field-howitzer batteries on the Bainsizza rather than send them back to the right bank of the Isonzo. Even the Vrh basin was too far from the targets to be struck.

This was the substance of the conversation between Capello and Cavallero as reported to Cadorna the following day by General Porro. What Porro did not say, and what Capello maintained he had said in the presence of Lieutenant Colonel Campi of his staff, was an exposition of the contradictions which, in his opinion, existed among the Supreme Command's different orders.

In any case, the sense of urgency existed in Capello only insofar as his mind had postponed the enemy offensive towards the end of October. There was still a good half-month for preparations. Thus the Sassari Brigade heard of its new tasks around 12 October, spent four days restoring itself to efficiency, was transferred to Manzinello and Buttrio on the 18th, quartered itself on the 19th and 20th, underwent the customary ceremony for presentation of decorations on the following day, and only on the 22nd - with barely forty-eight hours remaining - could devote itself to military exercises.

Since drawing up minutes and compiling reports requires time, General Porro's memorandum containing the substance of the Capello-Cavallero conversation was sent to Cadorna on 16 October and received by the Generalissimo on the 17th. At 1:30 that afternoon he replied by telegram:

> ... If attacked, Your Excellency can rely upon the forces at present available to you, with which it is therefore necessary to form the projected manoeuvre masses. To provide a better command framework for them, I order that VII Corps under General Bongiovanni pass under Your Excellency's authority. As regards artillery, Your Excellency may rely upon the pieces currently available and deploy them in the manner best suited to carrying out the manoeuvre conception described. Until the extent and direction of the enemy offensive are clearly established, I cannot authorise the movement of the group commands and batteries, together with one gun per battery, of

> the mobile artillery nucleus held ready at Third Army headquarters. I order First Army to place at Your Excellency's disposal one field regiment and two mountain groups. As regards replacements, the situation does not surprise me, because precisely in anticipation of the crisis now occurring I was compelled, much against my will, to decide upon a defensive posture. It is unnecessary for me to recommend that Your Excellency make complete use of all human material existing within the Army, including the numerous men declared unfit in the replacement battalions and Marine brigades. To avoid misunderstandings, I warn that no battalion is to be disbanded, however exhausted, without the express order of this Command. I shall arrange for lorries and motorcycles and, if possible, an increase in air resources.

This telegram increased Capello's doubts. It spoke of the "manoeuvre conception described" and again of "projected manoeuvre masses", but within a framework of thought that was strictly defensive. Yet Capello had "repeated", not stated for the first time, his offensive ideas to Cavallero. Did Cadorna approve the lightning counter-offensive or not? But had Capello perhaps spoken to Cadorna only of a counter-offensive to be launched once the enemy offensive had been "checked and paralysed"?

Was Cadorna seeing the counter-offensive through the distorting prism of his purely defensive orientation, or was Capello viewing defence as so active that what should have been a series of powerful but still limited counter-attacks became an immediate, if not preventive, counter-offensive?

Capello could not fail to see that a grave misunderstanding had arisen between himself and General Cadorna, one that had to be clarified immediately if the worst consequences were to be avoided, because time was passing inexorably. By the height of irony, several days earlier he had received the Military Order of Savoy because, according to the citation, "through active, diligent and sagacious command work, he had put the Supreme Command's design into effect on his Army front".

Far from being diligent and sagacious, his immediate action on this occasion followed the interpretation of Cadorna's telegram most favourable to the openly counter-offensive thesis rather than the Supreme Command's original design. His nature as a tactician rather than a strategist drove him in that direction. General Viganò summarised Capello's favourite ideas: "Keep one's forces ready in strength to attack the enemy in this and that way if he comes from here; in another way if he comes from there; to bottle him up at that point if he wishes to pass that way; to strike his flank with large forces while he attacks one portion of our front..."

The worsening of his illness also pushed him on, making him simultaneously eager to act and unbalanced in judgement. Ardengo Soffici, who returned to visit him on 16 October with Second Lieutenant Lorenzoni, again concerning propaganda among the troops, found him paler than usual and greatly wasted. Lorenzoni left a similar and independent portrait.

During the conversation, held towards evening on a cold and rainy day inside Capello's furnace-like room, the General referred to the impending offensive:

- As you will know, we are threatened by a major Austro-German offensive. The soldiers must be made to understand that there is no reason to fear the Germans, who by now are no longer superior to the Austrians as fighters.

He concluded:

- Yes! It seems they intend to attack me, and I ask for nothing better. It means I shall add Germans to my collection of prisoners, and we shall try to take many of them.

On 17 and 18 October Capello held two further conferences with his subordinate commanders. On the evening of the 17th, in speaking to General Bongiovanni, whose VII Corps was to support IV and XXVII Corps, he spoke much more of counter-offensive designs than of defensive intentions, though

they were to be developed "when the enemy attack, not feared but desired, had shattered itself against the resistance of our forward lines".

As can be seen, he used the same language with second lieutenants and army-corps commanders. To the latter, assembled together, he repeated that the presence of the Boches should not cause concern, while warning them not to exclude the enemy attack on the basis of general considerations such as the advanced season or Austria-Hungary's difficult condition. IV and XXVII Corps, the units against which the greatest threat was taking shape, were distinguished by particular obtuseness in interpreting the warning signs fate placed at their disposal.

It was instead necessary to prepare well, Capello insisted, and draw confidence from preparation. The line of conduct would be "counter-offensive action from the company to the Army". He did not dwell on counter-offensive action by smaller formations up to army-corps level, since these fell within the normal framework of counter-attacks.

The Army manoeuvre consisted instead of opposing the enemy engaged between Monte Nero and the Tolmino bridgehead with "a counter-offensive against his flank cutting every line of communication", an action which Capello considered - not wrongly, had it succeeded - extremely troublesome for the enemy and perhaps decisive in our favour.

For the manoeuvre to succeed, Capello explained, the necessary forces had to be scraped together. Army-corps commanders were therefore "requested" to burn their own wood and ask no additional reinforcements from Army headquarters, which possessed few reserves and wished to keep them for its own manoeuvre.

Centred upon Vrh, transformed into a launching concentration area, Capello intended to stab the attacker in the back along whichever of three possible directions proved most profitable: north-east towards the Lom positions, east towards the Chiapovano valley, or south-east towards the Ternova forest. With few changes, this was the plan already explained to Colonel Cavallero.

Rejecting the latter two possibilities, Capello declared the north-eastern direction more probable because it depended upon the "probable" direction of the enemy offensive. He said the attack would begin from Tolmino, extend "decisively" to Monte Nero and "probably also into the Plezzo basin".

For the second time Capello considered the possibility of an attack astride the Isonzo in the Plezzo basin, and finally began framing the Austro-German intentions precisely. In this he acted as a pioneer, because the Supreme Command's Situation Office had still attributed to the enemy only "the intention of opposing a possible advance by us" the previous day.

To meet this situation, Capello added:

> IV Army Corps has received during these days seven Alpini battalions and a good quantity of artillery. XXVII Corps has modified its artillery deployment, which is extremely powerful.
>
> Since an enemy attack beginning from the Dreženca basin and the Tolmino bridgehead and directed towards the Kolovrat and Matajur would be highly dangerous, because by reaching the upper Judrio and Natisone valleys it would turn all the defences of the Second and Third Armies, I have arranged as a precaution for VII Army Corps to be deployed from Zagradan Pass to Matajur, with the task of supporting the forward defences, constituting a reinforcement behind the wings of IV and XXVII Corps, holding the exceedingly important second-line positions of Kolovrat-Matajur, and manoeuvring counter-offensively at the appropriate moment.

According to General Caviglia, this definition of the tasks assigned to VII Army Corps "is partly so vague and partly so superfluous as to leave doubt that it was really written by General Capello". This

was a curious statement, since Caviglia attended the conference whose summary was distributed with the words quoted above and should have been able to confirm or deny them. General Viganò, on the other hand, considered the provisions concerning VII Corps "rational" and believed they should have been maintained. This shows that the art of war is not an exact science.

The Second Army commander issued further instructions in the event that the enemy made extensive use of gas shells and perhaps "gas released from cylinders", a prophecy that was later fulfilled. "The soldiers are to be told and reminded every day that our mask is the best used by any army."

The "execution of registration fire in the counter-offensive zones I have indicated" was to be managed meticulously. On that occasion, however, he said nothing about the behaviour the artillery should adopt in the zones upon which the enemy attack would fall. Finally:

> Training of the troops is to be attended to, including offensive action in great depth. Instruction is to be technical and moral. Rain is not to slow the activity hitherto devoted to training; enclosed places are to be found and moral instruction conducted.
>
> Every commander is constantly to ensure intelligent deployment of troops in depth so that sheltered forces are always available.

That same day, the 18th, Capello wrote to the Supreme Command formally requesting assignment of the three divisions of which he had so far seen no sign for the counter-offensive action. As for the enemy offensive, although he considered it probable from the Tolmino area, he stated that he still could not exclude Monte Santo and Gorizia as objectives.

Meanwhile General Cadorna, tired of the rain and irritations that had enlivened his holiday, was finally returning to Udine, where he arrived on the evening of the 18th, ready to receive General Capello the following morning.

During the last few hours it had also become clear to Cadorna that the matter was not a misunderstanding between himself and Capello, but an attempt by the latter to force his hand. Rather than clarify the manifest ambiguity, Capello had proceeded directly along his preferred road in order to conduct the manoeuvre dear to him.

Commenting upon his subordinate's conduct while still in Vicenza, Cadorna exclaimed:

- In any case General Capello must obey. If he does not obey, despite all the gratitude I owe him, I shall treat him like the others. This is a very grave question, and only one man must command.

The gravity of the consequences set in motion by this disagreement still escaped Cadorna, because he himself had by no means grasped the scale and direction of von Below's offensive, badly served as he was by his Situation Office.

The clarifying meeting between Cadorna and Capello took place on the morning of 19 October, when the countdown to the great enemy attack had reached ninety hours.

For Capello the journey from Cormons to Udine, only about twenty kilometres, was bitter. He arrived exhausted, according to his own account, "to the point of needing a cordial before climbing the stairs leading to the Chief of the General Staff's office". In a short time he had lost a great deal of weight and remained in a state of intense excitement.

The meeting was brief and formally friendly. Cadorna had prepared written notes and was ready to issue orders rather than open a discussion. He nevertheless moved solicitously to meet Capello, asked about his health and exchanged the usual courtesies. He showed a certain indulgence towards the Second

Army commander, partly because he respected him and partly because he did not wish to be accused of obstructing his ambitious subordinate's work through jealousy.

He was nevertheless determined to impose his original view: no strategic counter-offensive, but only local counter-attacks remaining within the tactical field. He set these provisions down in a letter addressed to Capello the following day:

> Your Excellency's design of opposing the enemy attack with a counter-offensive on the grandest scale is made impracticable by the present strength of the units and the extremely grave shortage of replacements. Your Excellency knows both circumstances and knows that for this very reason I was compelled, with great regret, to renounce the second phase of our offensive, which appeared promising of fruitful results.
>
> That being so, it is necessary to bring the development of the counter-offensive principle, the basis of every effective defence, within the real limits allowed by the forces available.
>
> The project for a great Army counter-offensive towards distant objectives must be abandoned. It would in substance lead us to develop a great reflex offensive no less costly than the second phase we have already renounced. Resolute counter-attacks will instead find a place within the framework of a tenacious active defence...
>
> For all the requirements of such a defence, the 336 battalions available to the Army must be amply sufficient. Your Excellency should bear in mind that, if the Central Powers were to launch an imposing effort against us next year, the need to meet attacks in other directions and retain a powerful general reserve at my disposal would certainly not permit me to leave forces equal to those now present on this front for defence to the bitter end.
>
> As regards the artillery... taking account of the more modest limits within which the operational design has been restored, the 2,500 light-, medium- and heavy-calibre guns and 1,134 trench mortars available to the Army must be sufficient to meet every requirement fully...
>
> Your Excellency will therefore formulate the new directives to be issued to subordinate army-corps commands, or the variations to the directives previously issued, in accordance with the concepts stated above. I shall be pleased to receive these new directives as soon as possible.
>
> Chief of the General Staff
> Luigi Cadorna

Among the reasons, Capello again relates, that led him to dream of an action more energetic and decisive than the one adopted by the Supreme Command was "the absolute necessity of allowing the enemy no success, however limited". Cadorna felt this consideration less strongly. He was thinking of the possibility discussed in Paris with Foch, Robertson and Pershing: that in the spring of 1918 the Central Powers, concentrating forces at ten divisions a month, might attack Italy with one hundred divisions from both the Isonzo and Trentino.

Against that prospect, the offensive then being prepared seemed small and not particularly threatening, because the Italian army still retained a substantial numerical superiority over the enemy. He was therefore willing to accept a partial withdrawal on the Bainsizza, abandoning the territory north of the Avscek Potok and drawing back XXIV Corps. According to Cadorna, this would recover further forces to contain the threat erupting from the Tolmino bridgehead.

Capello left the meeting dissatisfied and disheartened. He returned to Cormons and, unable to endure any more, immediately departed on convalescent leave for Padua, attempting to obey his doctor's advice

more faithfully than before. He left with a feeling of suspended uneasiness and the sense that the Supreme Command's clarification had come late.

Among the units in the field, however, his departure was interpreted entirely differently: it was not Capello who was ill, but the Second Army that was well. If Capello left, the Austro-German offensive was plainly fading into an indefinite future.

But what was the strategic counter-offensive plan upon which Capello and Cadorna had disagreed? In La guerra alla fronte italiana General Cadorna writes:

> This counter-offensive, to be conducted with a mass of six well-prepared brigades, was to begin from the Vrh basin - as the Second Army commander stated at the conferences held on 17 and 18 October for the army-corps commanders - and develop "in the directions that prove most convenient"...
>
> ... For a large-scale counter-offensive against extremely strong and exhausting positions, I considered the six brigades requested by the Second Army commander insufficient...

Yet on 15 October General Capello had told Colonel Cavallero that "he intended to develop this counter-offensive from the Vrh basin" and that for this purpose "he is preparing an appropriately trained mass, including the Sassari Brigade, which is being transformed into an assault brigade". Capello had not said that this mass was to consist of six brigades. He had instead requested an additional army corps of three divisions - that is, six brigades - to be deployed behind the Monte Jeza region, rather far from the Vrh basin, which would provide "at the appropriate moment the lightning speed of the counter-offensive".

This "counter-offensive" from Monte Jeza supplemented rather than replaced the manoeuvre beginning from Vrh. Capello, playing upon the ambiguity in his book Per la verità, says that he used VII Army Corps headquarters to command troops assigned to a defensive task or at least a "limited counter-offensive". He placed this corps, in accordance with his original intentions, behind the Monte Jeza region.

At the conferences of 17-18 October he again spoke of this corps, which was to support the defences behind the wings of IV and XXVII Army Corps - that is, behind Monte Jeza and not in the Vrh basin - and later "manoeuvre counter-offensively at the appropriate moment". The "counter-manoeuvre" was instead to begin from the Vrh basin. The related logistical measures were "entrusted" to XXIV Corps headquarters under General Caviglia, within whose jurisdiction the concentration area lay, as Capello had announced as early as the conference of 11 October.

Besides, on 11 October Capello had expressed to General Porro his intention to counter-attack with XXVII Army Corps towards the Lom positions at Tolmino.

In conclusion, it appears that Capello envisaged a double manoeuvre: a frontal "counter-offensive" by VII Army Corps, to which Cadorna probably consented when his telegram of 17 October spoke of forming the "projected manoeuvre masses" and carrying out "the manoeuvre conception described"; and a counter-offensive against the flank by the army corps on the Bainsizza, probably XXVII and XXIV, reinforced by an assault formation, the Sassari Brigade and the Arditi battalions.

Capello's plan, however, expressed so cryptically across many documents, was not clarified even after the war. Cadorna apparently confused the two manoeuvres. "The Commission of Inquiry into Caporetto did not learn what my plan would have been," Capello says, "because it did not ask me to explain it in detail." He himself carefully avoided explaining it to the public, limiting himself to saying that the

troops he requested for the "strategic counter-offensive" were sufficient "to launch a deep and not superficial thrust against the enemy deployment".

Perhaps the simplest explanation is the one suggested by Colonel Gatti:

> As a result of the progressive deterioration of staff work caused by the prolongation of the war, which produced a particular shortage of trained and capable junior officers, the exceedingly important drafting of orders became deficient or even defective at the various commands. The defect was especially evident at Second Army headquarters during General Montuori's interim command.

Immediately after the war, it was in no one's interest to revive a plan conceived and expressed in so fragmentary a manner. Time has now accumulated dust upon it.

As soon as he returned to Udine, Cadorna noticed that something was wrong. Everyone, beginning with himself, had taken matters easily through following the Situation Office bulletins or through disbelief. It was therefore urgent to obtain information about local conditions from the threatened corps. Colonels Testa and Calcagno of the Intelligence Office were sent that same day to the units thought most exposed: IV, XXVII, XXIV and II Army Corps.

Colonel Testa's visit to Cavaciocchi's headquarters became a dialogue between the deaf. Testa asked IV Corps headquarters what it thought of the enemy offensive. Cavaciocchi replied that he lacked sufficient evidence for a judgement, but that in doubt it was advisable to adhere to the most unfavourable hypothesis.

Testa wrote in his report:

> The Army Corps possessed no independent, personal sense that enemy preparations existed: little or nothing abnormal observed by the observation posts; not many enemy deserters; few registration shots, and so forth. Nevertheless, it did not exclude them and, in obedience to the orders issued by Army headquarters, was preparing actively to withstand the attack even if it developed soon and with great strength.

They then discussed the terrain. Cavaciocchi pointed out the weakness of certain positions and the relative security of others. The operation of the services was then examined. Cavaciocchi explained that it was perfect: almost nothing was needed. Testa noted:

> Requirements: generally none. The Army had already granted everything requested on a generous scale...

And the morale of the troops? "What can I tell you?" the commander of IV Corps replied in substance. "On 19 August the troops behaved well. Why should they not do so now?" Testa recorded:

> Moral conditions: generally satisfactory; no serious disciplinary event; very few desertions to the enemy... To the explicit question... concerning the troops' capacity to withstand a heavy bombardment... General Cavaciocchi answered by affirming his confidence...

Taken as a whole, Colonel Testa concluded, for all these reasons the enemy action caused neither fear nor doubt concerning the ability to break it. Colonel Boccacci, the corps Chief of Staff, almost regarded its occurrence as a fortunate circumstance for our arms.

Reinforcements were not discussed. General Capello had expressly forbidden Cavaciocchi to request them the day before, and the old orders had not yet been countermanded. Was it permissible to bypass Army headquarters and exploit the arrival of an envoy from the Supreme Command to protest and demand?

Cadorna nevertheless wrote years later:

> ... For what reason would the Supreme Command have sent its representatives to army-corps headquarters... if not to learn the state of the defence and any requirements, and provide for them immediately? Perhaps to discuss theology or numismatics?...

Yet Cadorna himself, implicitly justifying Cavaciocchi's bureaucratic embarrassment, added:

> ... I had already gone far by extending to the army-corps commands an inspection that properly belonged to Army headquarters.

The report Colonel Testa submitted to General Cadorna was surpassed in calmness by the one prepared by Colonel Calcagno, sent the same day to General Badoglio:

> The enemy offensive was expected more because of the consistent rumours reporting it than because of observation of large movements of men and matériel in the enemy rear areas... His Excellency said that he desired nothing: everything he had requested had been supplied immediately... As regards artillery he said: I lack none; I have enough.
>
> He was satisfied with the troops' morale. The thought that they would face the Germans appeared to have revived their fighting spirit...

After reading these reports, General Cadorna was filled with complete confidence. If those living in direct contact with the troops thought in this way, what fears could remain? Moreover, on that same day the Situation Office published a reassuring table showing that only twenty-six enemy divisions were deployed on the Julian front against approximately forty-five available to the Italians.

On Saturday, 20 October, one of the deserters reaching the lines of IV Corps was of particular value: First Lieutenant Maxim, a Czech company commander. He belonged to the 3rd Mountain Brigade of the Austro-Hungarian 50th Division and brought fresh information. A strong German contingent was to be inserted into the Tolmino bridgehead and aim at the capture of the Kolovrat. The action was expected to begin on 26 October.

The following day two Romanian officers crossed the lines. They carried a precious document: the detailed attack plan of their unit, which was to advance from Mrzli towards Monte Pleka. They were also well informed about the general operational plan and enemy deployment: an army corps in the Plezzo basin; then the Austro-Hungarian 50th Division; next, astride the Isonzo and tasked with advancing along both banks, the Silesian 12th Division. Three German mountain divisions would move from Tolmino, flanked farther south by another two, including the German 200th Division. Three more divisions were in reserve.

The attack would possess a decisive character from Plezzo to Santa Lucia di Tolmino, with Monte Jeza indicated as one of the first objectives. The two officers further specified that the artillery preparation would consist of four hours of gas fire followed, after a short pause, by ninety minutes of destructive fire with high-explosive shells. The probable date was the 25th or 26th, or perhaps even earlier.

Except for the date, this was almost the whole truth. The Situation Office still hesitated, publishing that same day that the reported presence of nine German divisions "must be received with great reserve". On the following day, however, it capitulated and admitted that enemy forces on the Julian front had risen to thirty-five and a half divisions, containing 421 battalions, compared with the real figures of thirty-six divisions, seven of them German.

Italian superiority on the Julian front was therefore fading day by day, but remained substantial. Our commanders based their confidence upon these treacherous considerations, remembering that during the August offensive, even with overwhelming superiority, we had struggled greatly to force the Austrians to withdraw their lines. If and when the attack appeared, there would be time to provide for it.

Some elements of doubt nevertheless remained. An attack from Trentino could naturally be excluded with certainty. On the 21st further confirmation came from First Army, based upon clandestine listening to conversations among recently captured prisoners.

The presence of Germans on the Isonzo had been demonstrated beyond dispute after the body of a soldier caught near a bridge pier at Gorizia was grappled from the water. The man, probably swept away at Tolmino, bore the collar patches of a German regiment clearly upon his tunic.

Uncertainty remained over the date. The offensive, vaguely announced first for the end of September and then for 19 October, had now been postponed until the 26th. Perhaps it would be delayed again, especially since a cloudburst around Caporetto had swollen the river, endangered the bridges and flooded a broad extent of the valley. Could the enemy attack under such adverse weather conditions?

The impression that time remained was widespread, as Father Semeria confirms. He passed through the Supreme Command on 21 October:

> The attack is discussed a little, but ordinary administrative matters much more. His Excellency Montuori, interim commander of the Second Army, learns by chance that I am there and wishes to see me. We also discuss the imminent operation. He does not seem particularly worried. By now their plan is known. It will be a second edition of May 1916. If they achieved so little then, when we scarcely expected them, what will they do now that we are waiting firmly in place? I return home with these impressions.

Father Semeria intended to make a brief trip to Rome:

> Monday, 22 October
>
> I leave Udine in the afternoon. In the morning, the usual lesson at the Liceo, the usual philosophy. In the evening they want me with Don Minozzi at San Daniele del Friuli, where a magnificent soldiers' home is being opened. I make a celebration of going there. This hilly pre-Alpine portion of Friuli is so beautiful, with a mild and strong beauty.
>
> That same evening I decide to take the direct train for Rome at Casarsa. The German attack will be on the 26th; everyone says so. I have time to give my little nephew his First Communion and return.
>
> At Padua station a group of friends, hardened neutralists and defeatists by congenital constitution, give me bad news. Capello has suddenly returned by motor car to Cormons that same evening. Every senior officer setting out on leave has been stopped and ordered to return. I continue. I shall be back on the 26th.

A few hours earlier, interception of a telephone communication had announced that the enemy offensive would begin during the coming night. The timetable had been brought forward. There was no time to lose: there was no more time.

After the melancholy meeting with Cadorna, Capello returned to Cormons to give Montuori new instructions in closer harmony with the chief's wishes. The following day he departed "in the anguished search for physical strength":"

> I left in the hope of obtaining several hours of tranquillity in Padua. A vain hope; even then I could not remain quiet. Orders and instructions were continuously requested through telephone messages and special couriers. I was also besieged by the many acquaintances and friends I possess in that city. I note that during those days I deliberately wished to be truly absent for everyone, so that through absolute rest I might recover my physical strength. But this was impossible.

After Capello's departure, the discussions continued among Cadorna, Montuori, Cavaciocchi and Badoglio. Cavaciocchi felt growing uneasiness over the weakness of his front. In particular, the fragility

of the Plezzo position began making him sweat: after breaking it, the enemy could reach Udine without encountering further Italian troops. He had already requested a division to place at Saga; Army headquarters had promised it, yes, but for November.

During the afternoon of 21 October, Generals Montuori, Tassoni and Bongiovanni followed one another through IV Corps headquarters. Bongiovanni came to coordinate the action of the new VII Corps deployed behind XXVII and IV Corps. Tassoni, commander of the Carnia Group, assured Cavaciocchi of his cooperation should a breakthrough occur at Plezzo.

Montuori had just inspected the 50th Division, where he again heard General Arrighi complain of the lack of reserves. Instead of taking careful note, he preferred to complain to Cavaciocchi about the request. General Arrighi had no right to speak in that way, since the titular Army commander had explicitly refused several days earlier to grant reinforcements. But what of the "clarifying" meeting between Capello and Cadorna, which should have overturned or at least softened the previous conceptions? As though it had never taken place. What sort of instructions had Capello left Montuori? And what had Montuori and Cadorna said to one another after Capello's departure?

Shortly after returning to Cormons, Montuori, who had evidently reconsidered the matter, telephoned Cavaciocchi and confirmed that through his conduct he believed he was interpreting Capello's thought exactly. To lighten the task of defence somewhat, while each man continued to burn his own wood, he suggested that Cavaciocchi study abandonment of the Plezzo basin and base the defence upon the Saga defile. In those circumstances this was not a contemptible suggestion.

Cavaciocchi was informed that the Generalissimo would visit him personally on the afternoon of the 22nd. During the morning Cavaciocchi travelled to Cormons to confer again with Montuori about the outstanding questions. Once informed of Cadorna's visit, however, Montuori preferred to suspend every discussion until hearing what the chief would say: proof that one needs the cat's paw to pull chestnuts from the fire.

Cadorna arrived at Creda together with Cavaciocchi, who had come from Cormons. They discussed the general situation. By now the attack was entirely certain and imminent. They also discussed the advisability of evacuating the Plezzo basin. Cavaciocchi opposed the measure, fearing there was insufficient time and that the enemy would catch him during the crisis of movement. In his view it would take five days to move those few battalions five kilometres.

If they wished to remain at Plezzo, however... Cavaciocchi, aware of earlier reprimands, hesitated to continue, not realising that at that moment he was pronouncing the gas death sentence of eight hundred soldiers. Cadorna came to his assistance:

- At least one brigade is required at Saga. Obtain it immediately from Army headquarters, to which I shall send confirmation from Udine.

The brigade indicated by Cadorna was the Foggia. They returned to the subject of an attack at Plezzo, about which Cadorna expressed absolute disbelief:

- I do not believe the enemy intends to put himself into the Plezzo basin. And in any case, let them come! We shall take them prisoner and send them to walk through Milan so that people can see them!

He then departed with the impression that Cavaciocchi, hesitant and depressed, was unequal to the situation. Cadorna was on the point of dismissing him immediately, but was restrained by the thought of provoking a command crisis at so dangerous a moment:

> The truth is that on that day General Cavaciocchi appeared to me uncertain and indecisive, and I left his command concerned that his unquestionable intelligence and distinguished qualities as a teacher and military writer were not matched by those of the man of action.

The bureaucratic mentality had so deeply permeated the Italian army that, when Cavaciocchi informed Montuori of the results of his conversation with Cadorna and requested the Foggia Brigade, he encountered further difficulty. Before releasing the Foggia, Montuori wished to wait for confirmation from the Supreme Command. In the end he yielded and the Foggia was able to begin moving, just in time.

As for evacuating Plezzo, Montuori again insisted that it be carried out during the night. When he learned that there was physically insufficient time to issue and execute the orders - it was already five in the evening - he postponed the decision, without cancelling it, until the following day.

These were not the only difficulties distressing Cavaciocchi during that tormented afternoon. At 2:30 p.m. IV Corps had received the following telephone message from Second Army headquarters:

> Napoli Brigade passes to the disposal of XXVII Army Corps. XXVII Corps is to take over the works and garrison of the Plezia-Foni-Isonzo line. It is thereby established that the front of XXVII Corps in that sector extends to the Isonzo. Defence of the river is entrusted to IV Corps. The 70-millimetre pack guns on the Plezia-Foni front pass to the disposal of XXVII Corps. Acknowledge receipt.

On the eve of battle, a change in the boundary between two formations was already a serious risk. In this particular case it was joined by the impenetrability of the document. What did it mean that defence of the Isonzo was entrusted to IV Corps? Would a team of swimmers be deployed across the current to prevent the enemy advancing upstream in boats? Clarification had to be requested from Army headquarters, and proved even more sibylline than the "obscure" original: to defend the Isonzo meant preventing the enemy from crossing from one bank to the other.

Since the previous day Cavaciocchi had warned his formations against the danger of a rupture along the Isonzo, facilitated by the extremely dense fog then prevailing and by a possible collapse of communications. With the new order, however, he saw his responsibility reduced. Towards evening he therefore withdrew the 9th Bersaglieri Regiment, deployed along the Plezia-Foni-Isonzo line, to the left bank of the river. With so few reinforcements available, even this shortening of the front was welcome.

XXVII Corps was asked by telephone whether the rectification could be carried out, that is, whether the Napoli Brigade was already deployed where the Bersaglieri regiment had previously stood. The answer came calmly: yes.

General Badoglio, however, had personal ideas about the Napoli's deployment. The order received, far from a literary masterpiece, did not logically connect the positioning of the Napoli Brigade with the Plezia-Foni-Isonzo line. Only one battalion of the Napoli was placed on Monte Plezia, extending several detachments as far as Foni, Point 600, which in turn continued along the ridge towards the Isonzo through a tiny party. Two other battalions were positioned at Clabuzzaro and three at the devil's own home, Case Ardielh.

The entire right bank of the Isonzo between Tolmino and Caporetto was consequently left unguarded, as were the numerous batteries covering the Raunza slope, blissfully unaware of the danger to which they were exposed.

As the hours passed, nervous tension increased. After dinner General Badoglio recommended that the officers keep their gas masks within reach. His headquarters had moved to Cosi because the customary position at Ostri Kras was too heavily engaged by enemy artillery, which had long registered upon it.

This placed three kilometres between Army Corps headquarters and its Artillery Command, which remained in the former location. Three kilometres are little for a Sunday excursion but may equal a cosmic distance when communications are interrupted and the ground boils with explosions.

General Badoglio was not concerned. Despite Capello's numerous warnings, he reserved to himself the privilege of ordering fire to begin:

- Go and rest, except those on duty, and remain ready for any call.

He then addressed the duty officer:

- You know where my room is. In any case, the Austrians will see to waking me.

Shortly after midnight, an unexpected telephone message from Cormons reached the army-corps commands:

> Having completely recovered, I resume command of the Second Army.
>
> General Capello

The hours passed slowly, until it became necessary to accept that no enemy attack had appeared. Indeed, the night had been quieter than usual: several rockets as always, a few isolated shots and nothing else. As tension relaxed, vigilance also declined. Perhaps the whole story of the offensive was a fabrication; perhaps there was nothing in it. Units placed on alert on the 22nd received no fresh instructions for the 23rd.

Uncertainty affected not only the rank and file but also some commanders. Others, however, sensed that only a breathing space had been granted. During Tuesday the activity became feverish.

The first substantial reinforcements began moving or arriving. During the previous days the Second Army had received approximately twenty-five thousand replacements drawn from men of very short stature, between 1.50 and 1.54 metres, who had completed their training. The 62nd Division was arriving from Trentino in a continuous succession of trains. It included the 4th Bersaglieri Brigade and the Salerno Brigade, which had vainly hoped for a brief respite at Bassano after the Karst inferno.

Agreements were about to be made between IV Corps and the Carnia Corps after the Supreme Command warned them of the need for a strong connection. During the early hours of the morning, the headquarters of the 34th Division, assigned to IV Corps, arrived at Creda.

General Capello appeared the most affected by the latest reports. Arriving at Cormons in the heart of the night, he was already in Udine at seven in the morning to confer with Cadorna. The conversation was stormy. The carabinieri guarding the grounds heard their excited voices as they argued while walking through the gardens of the Supreme Command.

In the end Cadorna consented to grant further reinforcements for the left wing of the Second Army. Capello immediately ordered the Potenza and Massa Carrara Brigades transferred to IV Corps, then travelled to Creda to see Cavaciocchi.

Cadorna went instead to Carraria, headquarters of VII Army Corps, summoning General Badoglio there as well. Cadorna relates that the commander of XXVII Corps confirmed the statements made a few days earlier to Colonel Calcagno and showed the greatest confidence. General Bongiovanni gave General Caviglia a more detailed account:

> Bongiovanni told me that on the morning of 23 October Cadorna went to him at Carraria and summoned Badoglio. Standing before the relief model, he asked Badoglio how he had carried out his orders, and Badoglio explained what he had done. Cadorna asked about several artillery groups

> that had not been moved. Badoglio offered as an excuse the time required to move them with all their ammunition. "On the other hand," he said, "an imminent enemy attack does not seem probable to me, because no substantial artillery registration has been observed," and went on at length explaining why he did not believe the attack would occur.

Badoglio belonged to the group of men who, deceiving themselves, deceived others. Cadorna reacted as though receiving oxygen:

- There, that is what I say as well...

The absence of registration fire was nevertheless a deceptive indication, resulting from the enemy's possession of improved firing tables which permitted accurate calculated registration.

At Cavaciocchi's headquarters there had been a cinematographic succession of arrivals and departures. After General Basso, commander of the 34th Division, General Montuori appeared in mid-morning, continuing to serve as General Capello's assistant, to decide at last whether or not to withdraw from the blessed Plezzo basin. Because of the absolute lack of time, they concluded that nothing could be done.

Shortly afterwards an Army headquarters order was delivered for information, defining the new and definitive tasks assigned to VII Corps:

> In the worst case that the enemy succeeds in breaking through:
>
> 1. I assign VII Corps defence of the entire line from south of Monte Jeza to Matajur, establishing contact with IV Army Corps troops, in order to dominate the Caporetto exit and cover the Natisone line.
>
> 2. Defence of the Caporetto exit is consequently based upon action to be developed from the Starijski-Matajur.

There was no longer to be a lightning counter-offensive, but containment of possible enemy progress.

Meanwhile Colonel Penna, on Cadorna's orders, was inspecting the state of the defences in IV Corps and judged the condition of the trenches highly mediocre. Shortly before noon Cavaciocchi was informed that Capello himself was arriving. Capello declared that he felt perfectly well. Cadorna, he said, had given him a scolding but had then granted every request. Cavaciocchi should therefore remain calm: two brigades, six Alpini battalions and seventeen batteries were on their way to him.

At one in the afternoon Cavaciocchi received the text of another telephone conversation intercepted by the Sleme station:

> Destructive fire will begin at two.

Urgent telegrams immediately warned XII, VII and XXVII Army Corps. But what of the connection along the Isonzo between IV and XXVII Corps? Cavaciocchi wished to send his Chief of Staff to inspect it directly, but had to leave him at Creda. He himself was required to go to Cividale, the new headquarters of the Second Army, because Capello - although he had seen him only a few hours earlier - had summoned yet another plenary conference to review the lesson in everyone's presence.

At that meeting, which began at four in the afternoon, Capello described the future, assuming the conference record was actually drafted that same evening and not several days later:

> The enemy would open the offensive with four hours of gas fire, followed by a short pause and then ninety minutes of drumfire.
>
> The enemy operation possessed substantial proportions both in objectives and forces.

> The presence of a German contingent, probably consisting of nine divisions, had been established. The Austrians possessed six divisions from Rombon to Tolmino, three of them in the second line.
>
> The enemy aimed at strategic results. By emerging from the Tolmino bridgehead and reaching the Kolovrat, Matajur and Monte Mia, they intended to envelop the Second and Third Armies. Saga was also threatened from the Plezzo basin.

After this precise prophecy, already known to most of those present, Capello examined the defenders' possibilities.

There was no reason for concern about the balance of forces, he said. Important reinforcements had been concentrated on the Army's left, so that IV Corps possessed fifty-five battalions and another six were arriving. XXVII Corps had also been reinforced by six battalions. In addition, a new corps, VII, had been deployed behind the junction of the two first-line corps.

As for defensive tactics, with the strategic counter-offensive now rejected by higher authority, only local counter-attacks and "broad and unsparing" use of the artillery remained. As soon as enemy bombardment began, the guns were to open violent counter-preparation fire, while extremely violent barrages were to strike the enemy troops the instant they showed signs of movement.

It must be remembered that little time would be available to man the trenches, because the opponent had certainly concentrated very close beneath the forward lines.

> And I repeat once again: keep troops in hand for manoeuvre...
>
> Reserves placed high are the most effective, which is intuitive because descending is easier than climbing.

After this elementary clarification, Capello spoke at length about gas attack. Collective protective measures were excellent and the multipurpose mask had been issued to everyone. The soldiers, among whom rumours circulated of new and deadly agents available to the enemy, should therefore be reassured.

The conference ended rather late. None of the army-corps commanders raised objections, and all gave the broadest assurances: the defences were thoroughly prepared and the spirit of the troops excellent. They then disappeared.

A final conversation among Cadorna, Capello and Badoglio nevertheless took place at Carraria, headquarters of VII Corps, although Bongiovanni was absent.

The three generals emerged into the courtyard speaking loudly. Captain Sforza, who was nearby, saw them gesticulating and repeatedly heard the word "Cavallero". All three were greatly agitated. Badoglio appeared to have assured Cadorna that the enemy would not pass, and Cadorna embraced him. Capello, by contrast, looked gloomy and distrustful.

Cavaciocchi returned to Creda as darkness fell. He condensed Capello's instructions into a single page and had the final orders circulated so that troop movements would be completed by five in the morning.

Badoglio was less diligent. Colonel Cannoniere, his artillery commander, learned nothing of the conference held that afternoon at Cividale, nor of the order, modifying those previously issued by Army headquarters, to begin counter-preparation fire immediately. On his own initiative he nevertheless telephoned Badoglio and requested authority to open fire at two in the morning. Badoglio categorically rejected the proposal:

- Absolutely nothing is to be changed. We have ammunition for only three days and I do not know whether I shall be able to obtain more for you. In any event, we shall meet.

Badoglio again prepared to spend the night at Cosi, three kilometres from the Artillery Command. Besides, it was the opinion not only of Badoglio but of many headquarters that "any closer connection would be fatal". There were communication systems capable of defying every emergency:

telephone links, which were immediately broken;

radio links between army-corps and divisional headquarters, which did not function;

optical and electro-optical links, which were blinded by fog;

acoustic links, two-tone trumpets whose melody vanished in the battle's roar;

carrier pigeons, which fell stunned by gas or went mad from the thunder of the guns;

runner teams, which invariably arrived late.

General Villani, commander of the 19th Division deployed in an arc before Tolmino, was less calm. In the end, all these German and Austrian divisions said to be preparing to erupt from the Tolmino bridgehead would fall chiefly upon him. Despite Badoglio's boldness and assurances - Villani depended upon him and had promised to be ready to immolate himself on Jeza - he did not feel his rear was secure.

At Bukova Jeza, for example, he had not a single man to place, he told his Chief of Staff on the evening of the 23rd. Patience was his philosophy: if necessary, they would all die with weapons in hand.

General Cadorna, for his part, went peacefully to bed. He had foreseen everything and was even prepared for the possibility that the attack between Plezzo and Tolmino was a gigantic feint while the enemy prepared to strike in force on the southern Karst. For this reason the Supreme Command reserves gravitated towards the Third Army. The latest reports indeed stated that further Austro-Hungarian troops were moving: British sources and the Italian military attaché in Romania had learned that the headquarters of the Austro-Hungarian Third Army was preparing to leave the Romanian front for Italy.

At two o'clock on 24 October came the first crash. Then the hurricane blew.

An account of the events that led with the mechanical inevitability of a Greek tragedy to the defeat at Caporetto would be incomplete unless some space were devoted to the spirit prevailing within IV and XXVII Army Corps, which were the first to be attacked, and within their headquarters and commanders.

The factotum of IV Corps was its Chief of Staff, Colonel Boccacci. Cavaciocchi, formerly a distinguished teacher and writer on military subjects, tended to reign rather than govern - it was said that after many months in command he was still unable to distinguish Rombon from Romboncino [32] - leaving the business of the office to his assistant, tall and fair-haired like a young Attila, with the help, malicious tongues whispered, of effective dyes.

Creda, the headquarters, was a village half Slovene and half Friulian, well screened from enemy fire by the rocky ridge which, beginning at Gemona, reaches its greatest height on the 1,700-metre summit of Stol and plunges towards Caporetto from Starijski. Although Creda was only seven kilometres from Saga, the topography required one to reach Caporetto and then travel back up the Isonzo along the Tarvisio road beneath enemy artillery fire, covering twenty kilometres before reaching the headquarters of the 50th Division. The road from Udine and Cividale was in fact the only important artery connecting IV Army Corps and its one hundred thousand men with life.

Well installed beside the road, Boccacci could count the passing lorries and the girls stopping there. His sympathy for the female half of humanity was indeed considerable and, since he possessed no racial prejudice, Slovene and Friulian women were equally welcome and, according to gossip, posed completely naked before the lenses of the Army Corps Photographic Office, which consequently neglected the study of photogrammetry. The "little red house", the pleasure nest whose residents wore upon their garters the collar patches of their favourite brigades, also enjoyed the high protection of IV Corps headquarters.

At Creda, the Swiss-style villa in which Boccacci lived possessed comforts and servants - soldiers and carabinieri, naturally, delighted to spare fortune the effort of saving them from the dangers of the front line. Boccacci was nevertheless a just man who desired the average level of discipline to remain high. The more indulgent he was towards himself, the greater his need to be severe with the soldiers. Large signs warned the unfortunate men compelled to cross the borders of the territory under IV Army Corps jurisdiction:

> HALT FOR EVERYONE - INSPECTION - HAIRCUT

The draconian order for hair "cut to zero", however, had not been issued to humiliate the men unnecessarily, but to preserve their welfare by protecting them from infection and suppuration in the event of wounds to the head. It was most unjustly attributed to Boccacci's cruelty, whereas the original responsibility lay with Cavaciocchi's kind heart. He had unintentionally supplied an example of how a charitable intention can become, in the hands of a deaf and dumb bureaucracy, an instrument for persecuting subordinates.

During a hospital visit, General Cavaciocchi had spoken with a surgeon who drew his attention to a dying second lieutenant. The young man, the doctor exclaimed, had suffered only a very slight wound to the scalp and would have recovered quickly had his hair not encouraged a staphylococcal infection which was now carrying him to his Maker.

The second lieutenant died the following day. Cavaciocchi returned to headquarters deeply moved and painfully impressed and immediately ordered the men's hair to be cut. The order, intended for troops in the line, was immediately interpreted as shaving the head to the skin. Since it did not appear fair for combatants alone to undergo this disagreeable depilation, in an act of useless equality it was extended to the men in safe billets behind the front and therefore throughout the Army Corps district.

Having no medical knowledge, Cavaciocchi could not naturally calculate how many cases of pneumonia and sinusitis his order, indifferent to harsh climate and season, caused in exchange for the probably reduced number of septic infections.

Many curses addressed to Boccacci were therefore undeserved. Several rifle shots directed at him, certainly not fired by Austrian weapons more than eleven kilometres away, demonstrated how ungrateful and unjust the soldiery was towards its Chief of Staff. The soldiers esteemed him little and loved him still less, as Lieutenant Muccini relates:

> ... When a motor-car siren is heard upon the Caporetto road, all the soldiers and any officers who happen to be there run into the fields and hide behind the trees.
>
> It is the Chief of Staff of IV Corps, the only man entitled to a siren, the handsome fair-haired colonel who has terrorised the Army Corps and passed the little machine over thousands of heads...

Enclosed within its Alpine borders, IV Corps had acquired a territorial mentality: frontiers, guarded entrances towards Italy, and passes. It resembled a small sovereign state administering the subjects

entrusted to it for as long as necessary - which, considering how matters proceeded, meant eternity. IV Corps consequently enjoyed little prestige with the superior command.

General Capello said that this great formation was entirely a "Health Front", which had long ago made peace with Austria on its own account. Its units consisted of tired and sluggish brigades, while the headquarters thought more about making their quiet residences less melancholy than about training the troops.

The legends were contradicted beneath the summit of Cukla itself, at an altitude of 1,800 metres, by a small cemetery containing the bodies of at least one hundred Alpini, whose skeletons bore witness to the continual attrition. And what a forest of crosses stood at Caporetto! Admittedly, soldiers died almost without fighting: a shell in a trench, several machine-gun bursts against careless men and the customary patrol actions all helped make front-line duty unhealthy even on the Health Front.

Lieutenant Muccini's testimony is exceedingly precise in this regard:

> ... The headquarters continue with their usual nonsense and break your most sacred balls with requests for lists, notes and reports.
>
> Only the day before yesterday they urgently asked for the names of soldiers from the 1880 to 1885 classes who knew Bulgarian and motor ploughing.
>
> The brigadier general is going on leave. And no one notices - or rather no one wishes to notice - that these nine uninterrupted months on Mrzli have bled and destroyed the regiment, whose soldiers, by now transformed into savage troglodytes, are consumed day by day in an obscure and treacherous struggle, inexorably condemned to death.

IV Corps headquarters did not fear the enemy. General Cavaciocchi had said on 14 October that the soldiers should be reminded of the anniversary of Jena [33]. Through studying military history so intensely, he had forgotten that many of his soldiers did not even know what year they were living in.

For a long time the headquarters persisted in believing that the enemy would not attack. It therefore did not take seriously the infantry's alarms when the men observed increasingly frequent bracket fire, with which the enemy appeared to be registering upon the trenches.

It is therefore unsurprising that on 17 October everyone unanimously told a staff officer sent from Cormons - Boccacci, General Sadini commanding the artillery, and Lieutenant Colonel Fettarappa, Chief of Staff of the 43rd Division, General Cavaciocchi being temporarily unwell - that "they did not consider a large-scale enemy offensive on the front of that Army Corps probable".

Army headquarters, which had long believed in the offensive, gave everyone a sound scolding. How could General Capello speak of a "lightning" counter-offensive when his subordinates did not believe there would be an offensive? This reprimand and other indications converted the unbelievers, but did not diminish their confidence.

The Supreme Command's envoy, Colonel Testa, was astonished and comforted by what he heard. Nor could his misunderstanding with Cavaciocchi have led him to write in his report, unless he had heard it with his own ears, that:

> the enemy operation caused no fear or doubt concerning the ability to break it. Colonel Boccacci almost regarded its occurrence as a fortunate circumstance for our arms.

Another three days passed before Cadorna arrived in person on 22 October, as already related. He remained uncertain how to interpret the inertia pervading IV Corps and proposed sending the 34th

Division, whose infantry consisted of the Foggia Brigade and which had previously been intended to hold Matajur and Monte Mia, as reinforcement and reserve.

On the following morning the divisional headquarters reported to Boccacci. Unfortunately for him, Captain Frescura formed part of the group and left this recollection of the meeting:

> Between one mouthful and another of golden bread dipped in egg coffee, the Chief of Staff admonished and comforted us as follows:
>
> "The divisional headquarters will be located at Caporetto or nearby. It will form the Army Corps reserve. The enemy announced his attack several days ago but invariably postpones it every day. Naturally, with this dreadful weather! I am sorry, because I should like him to try breaking his nose. Our positions are impregnable. And the enemy's programme is absurd. Have you read the enemy operational order brought to us by two Austrian officers who deserted? Incredible things! Enormities answering to the German mentality. The enemy intends to be at Caporetto in the afternoon and march upon Cividale in the evening. Cadorna's bulletin says today: The enemy finds us prepared [34]. Well said: prepared. Besides, you will have seen the perfect order prevailing in my Army Corps territory. It is the model Army Corps. Did you see the signs: Halt for everyone - Inspection - Haircut? Everyone who passes is compelled to have a mechanical clipper run over his skull. The idea is mine." [Boccacci was evidently decorating himself with the peacock's feathers.] "They will not pass. By the way, obtain all my circulars containing the road-police regulations. It is a matter I take very seriously, personally. I will not tolerate a cart travelling anywhere but on its right-hand side. Order. And haircut..."
>
> The Chief of Staff... swallowed the last mouthful of egg coffee and carefully wiped the lips shadowed by his well-tended golden moustache. Then he rose with knitted brows and a serious expression and dismissed us:
>
> "You may go."
>
> ... Somewhat overawed by the man's severe gravity, I did not dare ask my colleagues what kind of bald pumpkin an unfortunate man would possess after crossing the whole territory of the model Army Corps and being admonished by every sign: "Halt for everyone - Inspection - Haircut."
>
> For the shirker assigned to a service does not reason. He wishes to live. And he seeks his man in order to justify his office. In order not to die.
>
> "But this is the second time you have run the clippers over my skull!"
>
> "What do I know? Did you read the order? Haircut. And I cut. Too bad for you if you have none left."
>
> We came here to Susit to put down our small amount of baggage, then continued to Caporetto to search for our battle station, where we shall wait to be hurled into the line. We made a circuit of the village and its surroundings to orient ourselves.
>
> These are not cheerful people. Men and women look at us as though hiding a thought. I believe the only Italian women are the "geishas" of the tea house, the factory of military love...
>
> Here is the iron bridge at Caporetto, with the road running towards Monte Nero on one side and Ternova on the other. Here is the cemetery, suitably enlarged because so many crosses have been planted... And here is the road to Tolmino, the bridges crossing the Isonzo, and the small villages containing headquarters beneath Monte Nero and Mrzli.

> And here again is a sign attached to a telegraph pole: "Halt for everyone - Inspection - Haircut."

Only a few hours remained before Kirghis - the Ural-Altaic pseudonym chosen by Boccacci to confuse enemy interception services - would discover the ineffectiveness of the "Halt for everyone" signs against the Silesian 12th Division. Perhaps, Frescura comments, they were insufficient.

While a diarchy had been established in IV Corps, tempering good Cavaciocchi's authority with Colonel Boccacci's initiative, General Badoglio, commander of XXVII Corps, wished to hold his subordinate troops firmly in his own hand without assistance from intermediaries.

The rapidity of his career had not helped him develop a sense of proportion. Most Italians, for whom Badoglio's name is synonymous with the collapse of the army on 8 September 1943, are inclined to judge his intellectual ability severely. They will therefore not be surprised to learn that men who knew him closely at the time of Caporetto, such as Colonel Gatti, judged him equally harshly for what he did then.

Gatti, who subjected Badoglio's personality to minute examination, insisted especially that "the intellectual part of military art" escaped him. "His limited habit of dealing with great questions and his shallow culture made it difficult and laborious." Not satisfied, Gatti pressed on: "He lacked the quality that consecrates commanders, the constructive power of intelligence"; and a little farther on: "His intellectual sensitivity... was rather slow and limited."

What, then, distinguished Badoglio from what ordinary language calls an incompetent? "Ambition, love of the profession, a certain orderliness of thought, an exceedingly obstinate will and immense activity", especially since in 1917 he was still young and in full health. Italy's lucky star, which as this demonstrates does not always bring good fortune, had placed him precisely at the exit of the most formidable thrust the Austro-Germans were preparing to launch against us.

At that time Badoglio felt encouraged by his good fortune and eager to assist it. One means he had frequently employed was stroking Capello with the grain by proclaiming himself his "pupil". Another desire gnawed at him, more difficult to realise: to inflict a fine beating upon the Germans gathering against him. It was high play and a great risk, because unlike Capello the Germans were unlikely to allow themselves to be stroked without biting.

As Capello's pupil, Badoglio was obliged to embrace the concept of the strategic counter-offensive, in which XXVII Corps would probably play an important part. General Caviglia states:

> At that time the commander of the Second Army already possessed on and behind the Bainsizza the preparation necessary to conduct that counter-offensive, in the concentration of his forces, the deployment of his artillery, and the man to whom he would entrust the manoeuvre.

Who was the man? Caviglia does not say, but appears to imply Badoglio, unless he was speaking of himself.

Although devoting many words to his counter-offensive plans, General Capello had not neglected repeatedly to recall the necessity for a sound defence. As early as 30 September he warned XXVII Corps of the possibility that the enemy might attempt to capture the head of the Judrio valley or advance up the Isonzo, as he later did.

At the conference of 9 October he again insisted upon this point, explicitly drawing General Badoglio's attention:

> His Excellency Badoglio, who knows thoroughly the defensive problem of his Army Corps region, is to study in detail the measures for checking such an offensive [the strategic operation from the Tolmino bridgehead intended to seize the head of the Judrio valley] and report to me.

The following day Badoglio assembled his highest-ranking subordinate officers. Rumours of an enemy offensive, he said, had now acquired undisputed substance after what he had learned at the previous day's meeting. Defence of Monte Jeza must therefore be an affair of honour for the 19th Division. To lighten its already heavy task, an entire Alpini group was being sent to Krad Vrh, which could not be lost, "because that would allow the enemy to drive a wedge along the right bank of the Isonzo and threaten all our communications with the left bank".

The deployment of the Army Corps' three divisions - the 64th, 22nd and 65th - on the left bank of the Isonzo "essentially has the purpose of guaranteeing the security of the left flank of XXIV Corps operating on the Bainsizza".

Among the many instructions Badoglio issued while repeating Capello's warnings, one deserves to be remembered because he forgot it at the decisive moment: "No reliance is to be placed upon the telephone." A second important instruction concerned employment of the artillery:

> The troops must also be prepared for the special requirements of defence, and commanders must prepare themselves accordingly, refraining from demanding counter-battery fire insistently whenever a bombardment begins. The troops must instead learn to resist beneath bombardment, sheltered in the caves as far as possible. Counter-battery fire compels the grave expenditure of ammunition which I wish to reserve for the attacking enemy infantry.

In the communication of 8 October Capello had spoken of the need to save ammunition, but on the following day had insisted upon "drumfire". Badoglio's specific instructions therefore apparently went beyond Capello's intentions.

This, in any event, is the written record of Badoglio's conference. Orally he must have been more explicit, since General Rosso, commander of the Arno Brigade, summarised Badoglio's plan for his officers down to the rank of captain as follows: in the front line, a screen of troops intended for sacrifice; on the second line, strong resistance; and finally, when the enemy attempted to cross the Isonzo, everyone would move to the edge of the fire while the inferno of our artillery was unleashed to disorganise and destroy him.

This is the first reference to the "Volzana trap", which was to operate as follows: allow the enemy to advance along the right bank of the Isonzo towards Caporetto and, once he was bagged between the mountains and the river, draw the noose. The most similar manoeuvre in recorded history was probably Hannibal's when he attacked and defeated the Romans along the shore of Lake Trasimene. If Badoglio drew inspiration from it, he failed to remember that the Battle of Trasimene was fought in summer beside a warm lake and not amid the October mists enveloping the Julian Alps.

Many have wondered whether the "Volzana trap", which was not among the recipes prescribed by General Capello, truly existed even as the intention of the inexperienced Badoglio, or was invented by a malicious tongue. Vittorio Emanuele Orlando considered it at length in his posthumous memoirs, beginning from the premise that a deliberate omission of elementary defensive precautions by an Italian general, intended to trap the enemy and ending in a colossal humiliation, is always a fascinating subject. Orlando discusses it as a "hypothesis", not a "legend", because in his opinion it cannot be excluded.

General Caviglia is much more guarded:

> There has been much discussion of a trap secretly prepared by the commander of XXVII Corps in order to draw the Austro-Germans into the Volzana basin, attack them there with artillery and take

> them prisoner. The rumour is probably a deformation of Capello's counter-offensive intention against the rear of Tolmino.

"A cautious and measured judgement", Orlando calls those words. Yet he too cannot escape the feeling that they themselves constitute an enigma explicable only by insinuating that General Caviglia knew Badoglio's plan.

One man who knew perfectly well of this intention was General Cavaciocchi:

> The report [of the Commission of Inquiry into Caporetto] remains silent upon another matter which was nevertheless well known, because General Badoglio had expressed his intention about ten days before the attack within Second Army headquarters itself. He had planned to allow the enemy to emerge from the bridgehead and become committed in the attack, waiting to strike his dense columns with artillery once the road of escape had been closed by the bold counter-manoeuvre conceived.

The outline Badoglio described to Cavaciocchi on 12 October, while they waited together for General Montuori, had been sufficiently precise: leave a screen of troops along the Volzana-Ciginj sector, permit the enemy to advance on the Raunza slope and into the Kamenca valley, and finally overwhelm him with fire and counter-attack when he became entangled in the wire.

It is therefore impossible to deny the existence of the "Volzana trap", at least as an intention. Yet while nourishing these solitary designs, Badoglio also had to harmonise his plans with Capello's defensive-counter-offensive conceptions, to which the Volzana trap might add the artist's brushstroke.

The strategic counter-offensive intended to take Tolmino from the rear - the same manoeuvre that had failed in August - required the employment of the right wing of XXVII Corps, which consequently could not be weakened.

On 10 October, however, Cadorna had ordered that "XXVII Army Corps must place the greater part of its forces on the right bank of the Isonzo". It has been maintained in several quarters that through this order Cadorna merely intended to avoid sacrificing troops on the forward lines along the northern side of the Bainsizza plateau. This interpretation is contradicted by Cadorna's precise, although late, statement:

> the order... was suggested to me by the necessity of increasing the small number of troops assigned to face the exits from the Tolmino bridgehead.

XXVII Corps possessed twenty-seven battalions on the right bank of the Isonzo, diluted across ten kilometres, while twenty-two remained on the left bank deployed along only four kilometres. Had a linearly uniform density been adopted, at least thirty-seven battalions should have been placed on the right bank - ten more than were present there on 24 October - making it possible to double the troops defending Monte Jeza.

Badoglio did not receive Cadorna's instruction in its original wording, however, and Cadorna received no copy of the order as modified by General Montuori. On the following day, when paraphrasing the Supreme Command's order for subordinate commands, Second Army headquarters reproduced the other provisions word for word but entirely omitted the sentence concerning distribution of forces within XXVII Corps.

Montuori, who authorised the modification with his signature, must therefore have known and agreed. He was certainly not obliged to repeat the Chief of the General Staff's phrases literally, but neither was he permitted to assist Divine Providence - that is, the Capello-style counter-offensive - beyond certain limits.

And Capello? Temporarily out of service through illness, it would have been easy for him to separate his responsibility from that of others. To his credit, he did not. Capello therefore knew as well; and it is possible that the commander of XXIV Corps was also informed, since the Vrh basin from which the counter-offensive was to begin lay within his territory.

And Badoglio? It appears unlikely that he was a victim rather than an accomplice. Had he been a victim, he would have had every interest in clarifying his position instead of hiding it behind a curtain of silence or vague denials. That he regarded himself as an exceedingly important element in the plan for enveloping the enemy Army's left wing was declared without qualification to the Commission of Inquiry into Caporetto by a brigade commander of the 19th Division:

> The Army Corps commander, General Badoglio, had clearly expressed his operational conception and repeated it in subsequent written instructions. The 19th Division was to hold alone and with its own forces, sacrificing itself in place if necessary, because with the other forces the Army Corps Command must counter-attack and counter-manoeuvre over the high ground, aiming through the Lom positions at the bridges of Santa Lucia.

After Capello's counter-offensive project had been abandoned because of the Supreme Command's irreducible opposition, the tacit agreement among subordinate commands should plainly have disappeared as well. Without reaching insubordination, this had produced the indiscipline of minds which Cadorna observed in Capello "and not in him alone".

After Capello left Cormons, however, traces of his superior's ambitions remained in Badoglio. If the great Army manoeuvre could not be conducted, he would assume responsibility for carrying out the small manoeuvre within his own Army Corps and prime the "Volzana trap". If the plan succeeded, the nation would thank him. If it failed? Badoglio could not imagine that the nation would thank him all the same.

In carrying out this reduced-scale plan, it is impossible to establish whether Badoglio acted alone, enjoying no one's support, or still possessed a secret understanding with General Montuori, who was influenced by him. Everything depends upon the hidden meaning one chooses to assign to the order transferring the Napoli Brigade from IV to XXVII Army Corps: whether fate alone caused Montuori to issue it, or whether Montuori accepted a suggestion from General Badoglio, for which not a shadow of evidence exists.

The order transferring the Napoli Brigade to XXVII Corps - "which takes over the works and garrison of the Plezia-Foni-Isonzo line" - reached Badoglio during the early afternoon of 22 October. Badoglio carefully avoided deploying the Napoli upon that line, although in the strictest interpretation the wording did not compel him to do so.

Before withdrawing the 2nd and 9th Bersaglieri units that held it, however, General Cavaciocchi asked whether this could be done safely and whether their replacement by the Napoli Brigade had already been completed. He received an affirmative answer.

Badoglio's defence of his conduct is therefore inexplicable. He maintained that the order concerning the Napoli Brigade was too laconic for him to attach special importance to it and consequently deploy the brigade on the Plezia-Foni-Isonzo line, where only one battalion was instead strung out in a cordon. Even had he failed to understand the position's importance, Cavaciocchi's concern should have warned him.

There remains the doubt, unless Badoglio is to be considered more obtuse than permissible, that extension of XXVII Corps' territorial boundary to the Isonzo had been agreed between Montuori and

Badoglio to enable the latter more easily to execute his trap, which might acquire still greater importance after Capello's counter-offensive plan was rejected.

This suspicion is strengthened by the fact that on the same morning, 22 October, the 19th Division had received orders to withdraw the screen of troops on the low Volzana line and shift the defence to the spurs of the Raunza slope and Kamenca valley, exactly as Badoglio had told Cavaciocchi ten days earlier.

Caviglia comments:

> This provision, adopted suddenly, would have been excellent had it been made in agreement with IV Army Corps and had XXVII Corps headquarters been able to meet the consequences it produced.
>
> The right of IV Army Corps was left hanging in the air, although it had maintained the dangerous Meyli salient precisely to support the left of the Volzana line. The batteries of the Raunza slope and Kolovrat were left uncovered; there was no continuous and organised resistance line before the Tolmino bridgehead; the Isonzo valley floor and the Caporetto road were left open to the attacker.

Badoglio had therefore shown Cavaciocchi none of the consideration Cavaciocchi had shown him by first asking whether movement of the 9th Bersaglieri could be made safely. As a result of this move, approximately one kilometre of the right bank of the Isonzo remained accessible to the enemy, who could take in enfilade the two companies of the Alessandria Brigade defending the left bank opposite Gabrie.

What certainty is there that Capello was unaware of Badoglio's diabolical design? Everyone is free to judge after considering the following statement by General Capello:

> The manoeuvre conception I intended to carry out - imperfectly known to the Commission - was judged in the Report unsuitable for attaining its purpose. The judgement upon the plan expressed by the commander of XXVII Corps, reduced to a much smaller scale, was different, although in its limited scope and manner of execution it might be compared to a childish trap set for the enemy... into which he did not fall. Nor could matters have occurred otherwise!

To spring the "Volzana trap", apart from General Montuori's possible complicity - whether, by entrusting Badoglio with defence of the Plezia-Foni-Isonzo line, he encouraged him to perfect the snare - only the will of the XXVII Corps commander was needed, provided he directed the choir of his artillery with a master's hand and seized the fleeting instant with the intuition of a great captain.

Badoglio was nevertheless compelled to violate a long series of orders issued by Cadorna, adopted by Capello and even signed by Montuori.

The artillery of XXVII Corps was numerous and powerful: seven hundred guns, excluding trench mortars. Ammunition was equally abundant, since there were shells for three days of fire, which under prevailing habits meant seven or eight hundred rounds per gun. Considering the conditions in which offensives had often begun, when the foreseeable waste of ammunition was far greater, there was no cause for complaint.

The new Army Corps artillery commander, who had arrived at the beginning of October, was a colonel-brigadier bearing the fateful surname Cannoniere - Gunner. He set energetically to work, determined to make the intervention of the pieces under his orders as effective as their number suggested. Under his instructions, groups and batteries had been "exercised" through continual firing under the guidance of learned and capable collaborators specialising in the mathematical physics of ballistics.

Cannoniere did not suspect that when the time came to decide the employment of the artillery, his commander would oppose him with a categorical refusal and reserve for himself, and himself alone, the right to order fire opened.

Badoglio also told a marching company of soldiers on 18 October that he expected great things from his artillery:

- I am your Army Corps commander. We shall therefore be attacked by the Austrians and Germans. No fear, lads; we shall give them a beating. I have enough guns to smash them before they reach our lines.

A corporal from the company stepped forward and answered:

- General, sir, there is no need for so much artillery. We shall be enough with the machine guns.

Had the corporal guessed how his General intended to orchestrate the artillery, he would have been less calm.

Capello had always insisted that, when necessary, artillery intervention must be automatic. The order of 11 October signed by Montuori stated explicitly:

> ... [the breakthrough zones] are to be heavily engaged from the beginning of the enemy bombardment, in order to smother the spring of the opposing infantry during its preparation, crushing them in their own starting trenches before their attack can even be launched.

A little farther on it stated:

> ... as soon as enemy bombardment begins, artillery and infantry must at every moment remain vigilant and ready to repulse the attack.

On 22 October, when the final act was about to begin, General Montuori sent a further clarification to subordinate commands:

> It now appears almost certain that, in the event of attack, the enemy will direct a very brief destructive fire of one or two hours upon our front-line trenches. Not a minute must therefore be lost. As soon as he begins firing, our medium-calibre artillery and trench mortars must immediately open fire upon the enemy lines...

This was a sibylline clarification, since it was already known that the enemy fire would be divided into two stages: the first at two in the morning, consisting of gas fire for four hours, and after a brief pause a second stage lasting one or two hours and possessing a destructive character. Did Montuori's order refer to the first or the second stage?

If Montuori was not an accomplice, he was certainly a bungler, and behaved as one during those decisive hours. When XXVII Corps requested an explanation from General Egidi, Chief of Staff of the Second Army, he replied that fire should begin only after the enemy destructive bombardment had started. Everything therefore fitted together to trap the enemy at Volzana. That same evening, believed to be the one preceding the attack, Badoglio transmitted General Egidi's interpretation to Colonel Cannoniere.

The night before the 23rd passed without incident. During the conference held at Cividale on the following afternoon, Capello radically modified the order issued by his replacement:

> ... in order to launch the attack after five and a half hours of fire, the [enemy] troops must be concentrated extremely close to the forward lines.
>
> We shall bear this circumstance in mind and open counter-preparation fire upon the starting trenches and enemy concentration zones shortly after his bombardment begins, remaining ready to conduct exceedingly violent barrages as soon as the enemy shows any sign of moving.

A little earlier he had stated:

> ... there emerges... the necessity of saving the greatest possible number of men; and men are saved through broad use of artillery.

Badoglio carefully avoided informing Colonel Cannoniere of Capello's new instructions. During those same hours, Cannoniere had learned from an intercepted telephone communication that an earlier movement of the enemy infantry was suspected. He therefore telephoned Cosi, where Badoglio had returned in the meantime, and again requested authority to begin counter-preparation fire at two in the morning. Badoglio refused:

- Absolutely nothing is to be changed. We have ammunition for only three days and I do not know whether I shall be able to obtain more for you. In any event, we shall meet.

Under those conditions, thinking of saving ammunition was almost a crime. From the phrase "we shall meet", Cannoniere believed Badoglio intended to move to the village of Ostri Kras, the customary headquarters of XXVII Army Corps, very close to Pusno, where the Artillery Command was housed in large and secure caves.

Only from there could the order to open fire, which Badoglio wished personally to give, be transmitted in time to the numerous batteries waiting impatiently amid enormous stacks of shells.

The General remained at Cosi. At precisely two o'clock the whole headquarters was on its feet. Positioned at the telephone, Badoglio contacted his subordinates: everything was well; the gas fire was not serious; casualties were few. At six relative quiet returned and for half an hour the fire became weak and measured.

Then at 6:30 the truly apocalyptic destructive bombardment began. The moment had come to order fire opened. But the telephone fell silent. However violently the receiver was shaken and struck, not a thread of voice came from it, because a malicious enemy shell had severed the wires connecting Cosi with Pusno. General Badoglio could not give the order of which he had dreamed with open eyes during those days.

It was certainly a great disappointment. With few exceptions, the whole artillery remained silent amid the astonishment, dismay and rage of the infantry. The "Volzana trap" failed to spring because the hunter could not close the cage.

The story is far from clear. The report of the Commission of Inquiry into Caporetto was, it is said, deprived of thirteen pages which have never appeared and which concerned precisely XXVII Army Corps and the employment of its artillery. Perhaps only the Historical Office of the General Staff possesses the means to dispel the many mysteries.

It may also be that the Machiavellian "Volzana trap" was a manifestation of naivety on the part of the future Duke of Addis Ababa, who many years later declared bitterly:

> It is easy to issue an order, but to put it into effect requires overturning every conception governing operations during two and a half years of war. The Italian army was prepared neither technically nor morally for the defensive, especially on the front of the Second Army, so aggressive and impetuous.

Whether Machiavellian or naive, General Badoglio - technically and morally unprepared for the defensive - invariably cuts a poor figure.

Defence against asphyxiating gas had been the subject of study and care by the Italian Supreme Command. The drafting of the numerous practical booklets distributed to combatants in the line was usually entrusted to educated and well-prepared officers. After collecting from surviving gas casualties

testimony about what had happened beneath chemical attack, commissioning the most varied experiments from the finest laboratories and completing their preparation through treatises and encyclopaedias, these officers wrote down the best and most effective means of defence against asphyxiating gases.

According to the vital organs of the human body they preferred, the gases were classified as choking, tear-producing, sneezing and blistering agents. For the greater edification of the other ranks, these booklets did not omit the scientific names of the most common gases, such as carbonyl dichloride, commonly called phosgene, or dichlorodiethyl sulphide, alias mustard gas. A careful reading of those manuals was quite frightening. Fortunately almost no one studied them, so morale remained high.

A booklet distributed to Third Army soldiers described how gas attack could be carried out either with projectiles filled with special liquids, also frequently used by Italian artillery, or through the release of deadly clouds contained in pressurised cylinders. The most interesting part was a decalogue for "the soldier subjected to gas attack", whose principal provisions required him to put on his respirator as quickly as possible and remove it as late as possible.

This was not easy. It was enough to try breathing for some time through the filter. While standing still, faces became congested and purple after fifteen minutes. During rapid movement, breathing became laboured and it was almost impossible to keep the mask on.

The Austro-Hungarian artillery possessed an abundance of shells filled with "green-cross" and "blue-cross" gases, delightful combat names given to diphosgene and diphenylchloroarsine. According to the malicious experimental results of the great German chemists, which proved excessively optimistic in practice, the latter was supposed rapidly to make mask filters useless.

The effect of phosgene at high concentration was terrifying. A single breath was sufficient for the complete burning of the lung tissue to cause death within a second. Against extremely high concentrations, the multipurpose mask, made of layers of gauze soaked in castor oil, potassium permanganate, zinc sulphonate and other contrivances, offered little protection. Each chemical and its supporting gauze created a further obstacle to breathing.

It was considered certain that the enemy would make extensive use of chemical agents at Caporetto. At the conference of 18 October Capello had said:

> ... On the British front the enemy made extensive use during the latest actions of special shells and gas released from cylinders. It is necessary to be ready for such an eventuality.

At the conference of the 23rd he stated:

> ... It appears that the enemy will unleash the attack relying upon the effect produced by the gases he employs...

There was little that could be done against gas released from cylinders, as we had learned at our own expense at Bosco Cappuccio in June 1916, when six thousand Italian soldiers were exterminated. The danger was decidedly greater than that posed by gas shells, because a lethal concentration could be reached more rapidly and easily within a restricted area.

The previously quoted Third Army booklet nevertheless continued that an attack of this kind required lengthy preparation. The wind direction had to be studied, perhaps by releasing sounding balloons visible to the threatened side. Cylinder dumps had to be prepared in the trench and an entire distribution system constructed with pipes and valves. So many works were necessary that it was almost impossible for the other side not to notice.

When the enemy trenches were close, an attentive observer during the final moments before the attack might even see, before dying, the emission pipes projecting from the parapets and loopholes with their mouths tilted slightly upwards.

What means were available to defend against a gas-release attack? Another booklet published by the Supreme Command explained the matter in abundant detail. To begin with, it stated, the start of the attack was announced by the hissing of escaping gas, a sound "resembling steam escaping from a boiler". Unfortunately, "the cloud is not always visible, especially in very dry weather; and naturally it is not visible at night, except under special conditions".

Once it had been established that the cloud was advancing, there were many things to be done with the utmost calm in addition to sounding the alarm. First, one began putting on the mask and verified that no gaps existed between the face and its rim. To block every draught, soldiers were to carry a small tin of petroleum jelly in their pockets and spread it especially around the eye sockets, where the angular cheekbone might offer passage to the poisonous fluid.

Anti-cloud measures were then to begin. "In front of the trenches one should," the manual continued with a modest conditional, "spread quicklime, preferably mixed with coal dust." As the cloud approached, the lime should be wetted while prepared bonfires were lit and flamethrowers, incendiary bombs and other dilating devices put into operation.

This was not sufficient. The evil cloud should be sprayed with five-per-cent Solvay soda solution - "one handful of soda per litre of water" - using any pump, assuming one was available. Rifle and machine-gun fire also helped break up the asphyxiating cloud for reasons that were unclear but undoubtedly dictated by experience.

The important thing was that the soldier should not run from the wave. At this point, attributing to it a cruel and perverse living personality almost like that of a hideous witch, the booklet stated literally that the soldier "if he flees, encounters death, because he drags the wave behind him and it pursues him inexorably".

How much time was available to perform this complicated ceremony?

> Bear in mind that the asphyxiating cloud reaches our trenches at the speed of the prevailing wind and that, assuming a speed of three metres per second, the cloud covers a distance of approximately two hundred metres in one minute.

Since many Italian trenches were much less than two hundred metres from the Austrian positions, there was no time to take a short nap.

And the weather conditions? The booklet again supplied the answer:

> Fog and fine drizzle do not prevent gas attacks.

If the attack came by night, in fine drizzle and fog amid the thunder of artillery, there was nothing to do but commend one's soul to God. That is what the thousand men of III/87th Infantry of the Friuli Brigade would have done, had they imagined it, when on 24 October 1917 one thousand gas projectors supplied by two thousand phosgene cylinders were positioned against them.

The Italian first line, the so-called forward defence line which in Capello's intention was to be held by small forces intended for sacrifice, had been traced by chance. Wherever bloody attack and defence had neutralised one another, the frontier between the two armies had been planted. Since the Italians possessed more men to waste than the Austro-Hungarians, it is unsurprising that their positions were less favourable than the enemy's.

Along the slopes of Rombon and Cukla, held by the Alpini, the opposing trenches were so close that our wire was tied to the enemy's. The distance rarely exceeded two hundred metres, sometimes vertically, with the Italians underneath, naturally. From time to time ideas were exchanged between the opposing lines:

- Tell me, Italian, what is there worth seeing at Caporetto?
- Shit.

The steep mountains plunged into the Plezzo basin, where the trenches were described in military bureaucratic language as "unfortunate" because they were dug in mud and swept by artillery positioned on Javorcek. The garrisons distributed along the northern ridge of Polounig, overlooking the Slatenik stream and extending up to Monte Nero, were slightly better placed. Monte Nero had been captured by the Alpini of the Exilles Battalion in distant June 1915 through an action as courageous as it was fortunate.

Farther south, along the slopes of Mrzli and Sleme, the situation again became murky. The lines wound along the western slopes while the Austrians held the summits. With books in hand, the higher authorities attempted to persuade themselves and the battalions sent to hold these reverse-slope positions that every cloud has a silver lining and that if the enemy attacked in closely packed masses he would be annihilated by the formidable artillery on the opposite bank of the Isonzo.

Everything was correct in theory. In practice, Lieutenant Carlo Salsa observed:

> When the Austrians trouble us by throwing bombs or rolling boulders down upon us, a single artillery concentration would be enough to make them stop. We telephone battalion headquarters, which must request regimental headquarters, which must inform the brigade, which will consider the matter. Thus when the shells finally arrive, the enemy operation has long since ended; and the alarmed Austrians begin again. Intending to make them stop, we make them start again.

When the enemy did not attack "in closely packed masses", as in fact never happened, and our own men instead had to climb, the unhealthy nature of this section of the Health Front became apparent. The following is a description of an assault conducted after heavy artillery preparation:

> The Alpini began the operation from the upper face of the Lunetta. But when they tried to emerge in single file through the opening made among the sandbags, rare shots came from the rocky bastion ringing the summit like a Titanic crown, methodical shots like those of a solitary sentry among the stones. With each shot an Alpino collapsed among our wire. They all fell one upon another inside that bottleneck, which was soon barricaded by the human pile.
>
> A two-hundred-metre slope had to be overcome: a vertical plane, a sheet of glass. It was not even possible to pass the small hedge surrounding our trench. The Alpini commander, a taciturn major as severe as an ascetic, reported to headquarters after halting the first attempt by his own order, describing the terrain and the impossibility of persisting. Headquarters asked by telephone for the number of losses.
>
> "About thirty men," came the answer.
>
> "Resume the operation," they ordered without further discussion.
>
> Holy God, with this paltry total of thirty dead, how can one demonstrate that an attack cannot be conducted?
>
> The attack was attempted again in mass from several exits.

A machine gun began chattering again above, among the dens worming through the wall of rock.

But the Alpini, great boots and all, continued pouring from the trench, impassive. One must go; the order exists; it is my turn, and therefore there is nothing more to say.

"Suspend the operation!" the Major ordered again, and returned to the telephone.

After an intense consultation he was seen to throw down the receiver and leave the little room. To his adjutant he said calmly, with his austere and melancholy brevity:

"I shall go out myself. It is the only means of stopping the attack."

He went out alone and fell upon the heap of his Alpini. The operation above was then suspended.

These were old stories, dating from spring 1916. There had subsequently even been a temptation to abandon those indefensible positions. In May 1917 Cadorna asked General Piacentini, then commanding the Second Army, how solid he considered IV Corps' lines in the event, then neither imminent nor probable, of an enemy attack. Piacentini replied that the slopes of Mrzli and Sleme were untenable, whereas the line from Monte Nero through Pleka to the Raunza slope on this side of the Isonzo was good.

The desire to retain as much as possible of the "conquests" and the fear of relaxing the grip upon Tolmino, that thorn in the heart, prevented anything from being done.

A little south of Gabrie the lines crossed the Isonzo onto the right bank, where the Tolmino bridgehead protruded dangerously into our deployment. Until the preceding March our outposts had been thrust so far beneath the three hills of Pan di Zucchero, Santa Maria and Santa Lucia that the author of the following verse had not exaggerated:

> To the right of the Isonzo
> stands Santa Maria.
> If you are tired of living,
> I shall show you the way.

Later the occupation in strength was withdrawn here as well, leaving only an observation line before Tolmino, which was partially drawn back on 22 October.

West of Tolmino, Monte Jeza was the pivot of every defensive arrangement. There was no doubt that if the enemy attacked, it would be the key position.

Near Monte Jeza the three Italian defence lines approached until they almost touched. After passing close to Ciginj, the forward defence line remained two kilometres from the summit and followed more or less the watershed separating the Doblar stream from the Isonzo valley along the summits of Varda Vrh, Krad Vrh and Cukli Vrh. The final or Army line passed instead over the summits of Jeza. An Austro-German advance of two kilometres would therefore open a breach through the entire Italian defensive system.

The intermediate line, the "defence to the bitter end", coincided with the forward line except in the Plezzo basin, which was left to the east, and along the section from Monte Rosso to Volzana. Beginning at Monte Canin, the Army line touched Stol and Starijski, crossed the Isonzo briefly at Volnik, recrossed it near Smast, then passed through Luico, Podlabuk, Jeza and Globocak before reaching the Isonzo again at Liga.

At the moment of the assault, the following Italian forces were distributed along these lines: 50th Division, thirteen battalions, eleven in the first line and two in the second; 43rd Division, fifteen battalions, nine in the first line, two in the second and four in reserve; 43rd Division, eighteen battalions, thirteen in the first line, three in the second and two in reserve; and 34th Division, nine battalions, all in reserve.

> *Translator's note: the printed source repeats "43rd Division" for two different formations. The repetition has been retained. The source also leaves blank the total number of IV Corps battalions; the component figures and the following sentence establish the total as fifty-five.*

These four divisions constituted IV Army Corps, which therefore had fifty-five battalions. The Potenza Brigade, with nine battalions, was hurrying to assist in accordance with Capello's orders.

Before Tolmino stood the 19th Division of XXVII Corps, which together with the Army Corps reserves totalled twenty-seven battalions, twenty-one in the first line and six in reserve. The other three divisions of XXVII Corps - the 64th, 22nd and 65th, twenty-two battalions in all - connected on the left bank of the Isonzo with XXIV Corps.

Behind IV and XXVII Corps stood VII Army Corps, the 3rd and 62nd Divisions, with thirty battalions in all, six of them in reserve. Six battalions of the Salerno Brigade, however, were still moving.

Against the fifty-five battalions of IV Corps the enemy deployed fifty-six - the 3rd Edelweiss, 22nd Schützen, 55th and Jäger Divisions, the 50th Division and four battalions of the 12th Division - of which forty-seven were assigned to the first assault and nine to support.

Against the 19th Division and VII Corps the enemy sent sixty-four battalions into the attack, forty of them in the first echelon: five battalions of the 12th Division, the Alpenkorps, and the 117th, 200th, 26th, 1st and 5th Divisions.

This wave would strike the twenty-one first-line battalions of the 19th Division. Enemy forces were not uniformly distributed, however. In the Plezzo basin fifteen Austrian battalions faced five of ours; the three battalions of the Silesian 12th Division advancing on the right bank of the Isonzo had practically empty ground before them; and on Krad Vrh twenty battalions opposed three of X Alpini Group.

The strength of the respective units has been much debated because enemy superiority, far from overwhelming, was slight. The Austro-German formations were naturally at full strength. It is more difficult to evaluate our own. On 6 October the Second Army reported a nominal strength of 831,000 men, but 146,000 were absent for various reasons, assigned elsewhere, on leave or in medical establishments. Thus 82.5 per cent of the establishment was present.

In the absence of more precise data this may be taken as the completion level of the Italian units. Our 112 battalions therefore represented the equivalent of approximately ninety enemy battalions, whereas the enemy had 120 in all, producing numerical superiority of four to three. As for individual units, the brigades of IV Corps were reasonably complete, while the 19th Division, against which the enemy concentration appeared most threatening, was short of men.

Italy's fate was not being decided only at Udine, Kreuznach and Baden. In London and Paris too, events were moving towards a single point of convergence. Paris had resigned itself to the situation. The French, struggling to keep their nine hundred battalions standing in one hundred thin divisions, believed it necessary to wait for "the Americans and the tanks", as General Pétain had said. For the time being they permitted themselves only several local attacks supported by crushing superiority of fire. For these excellent reasons they had no intention of helping anyone: neither the Russians nor the Italians, who still possessed so many young lives to waste.

ITALIAN DEPLOYMENT

Schieramento italiano

IV C. d'A.

1. btg. Dronero
2. btg. Saluzzo
3. btg. Borgo San Dalmazzo
4. I/88°
5. I/87°
6. II/87°
7. III/87°
8. II/88°
9. III/88°
10. btg. Mondovì
11. III/280°
12. btg. Ceva
13. II/280°
14. I/280°
15. btg. Argentere
16. btg. Monviso
17. I/97°
18. II/97°
19. III/97°
20. I/98°
21. II/98°
22. III/98°
23. I/223°
24. II/223°
25. III/223°
26. btg. Belluno
27. btg. Albergian
28. I/9° B
29. II/9° B
30. III/9° B
31. btg. Val Chisone
32. I/224°
33. II/224°
34. III/224°
35. I/147°
36. II/147°
37. III/147°
38. I/155°
39. II/155°
40. II/156°
41. I/148°
42. II/148°
43. III/148°
44. I/156°
45. I/2° B
46. II/2° B
47. III/2° B
48. III/155°
49. III/156°
50. I/281°
51. II/281°
52. III/281°
53. I/282°
54. II/282°
55. III/282°

XXVII C. d'A.

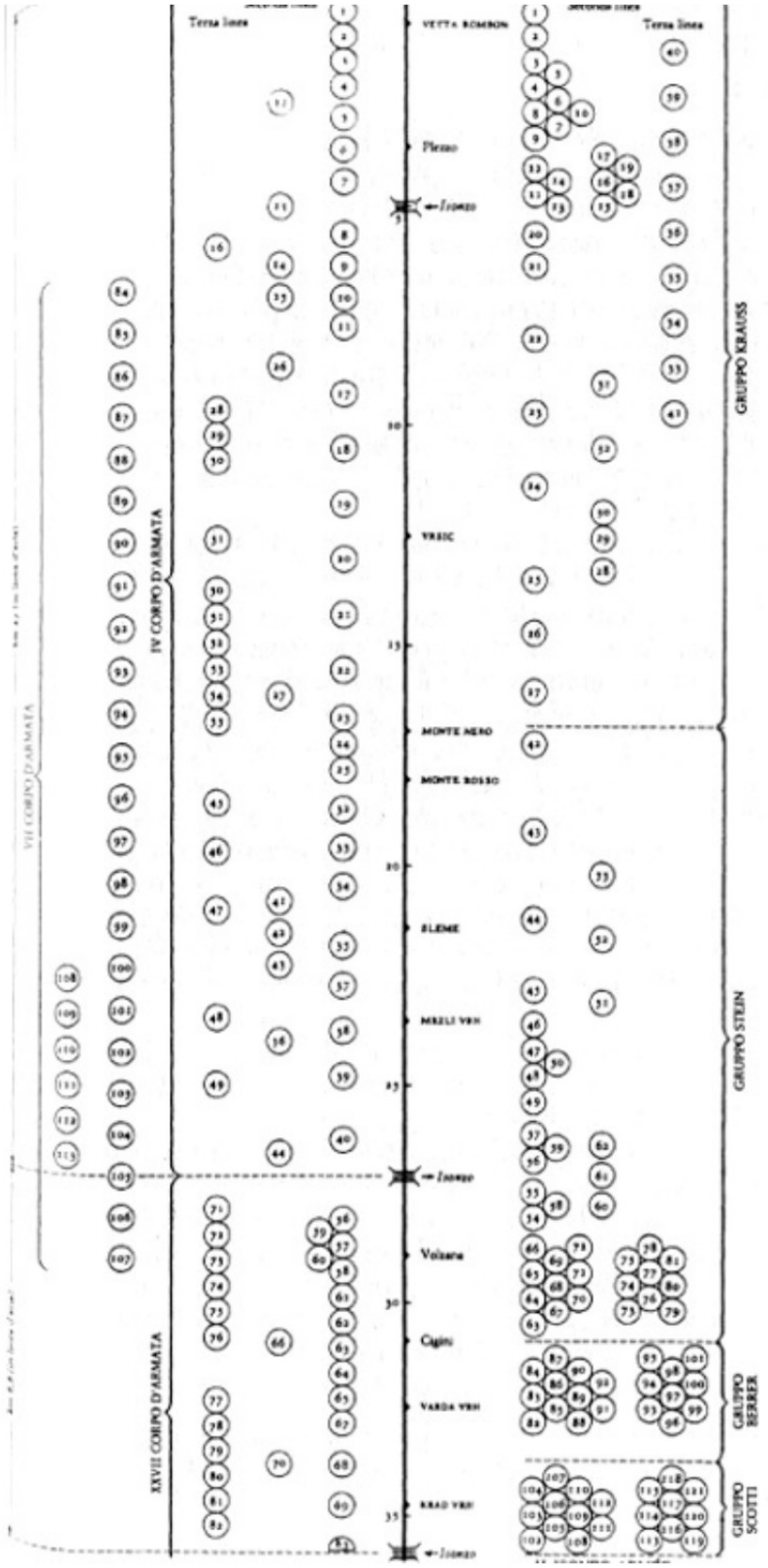
56. I/208°
57. III/207°
58. I/207°
59. II/207°
60. III/208°
61. I/126°
62. II/126°
63. III/126°
64. I/125°
65. II/125°
66. III/125°
67. btg. Morbegno
68. btg. M. Berico
69. btg. Vicenza
70. btg. Val d'Adige
71. III/76°
72. I/76°
73. II/76°
74. I/75°
75. II/75°
76. III/75°
77. I/71°
78. II/71°
79. III/71°
80. I/72°
81. II/72°
82. III/72°
83. ½ btg. 274°

VII C. d'A.

84.	I/89°	br. Salerno
85.	II/89°	
86.	III/89°	
87.	I/90°	
88.	II/90°	
89.	III/90°	
90.	I/14°	IV br. bers.
91.	II/14°	
92.	III/14°	
93.	I/20°	
94.	II/20°	
95.	III/20°	
96.	I/213°	br. Arno
97.	II/213°	
98.	III/213°	
99.	I/214°	
100.	II/214°	
101.	III/214°	
102.	I/261°	br. Elba
103.	II/261°	
104.	III/261°	
105.	I/262°	
106.	II/262°	
107.	III/262°	
108.	I/127°	br. Firenze
109.	II/127°	
110.	III/127°	
111.	I/128°	
112.	II/128°	
113.	III/128°	

8. Lo schieramento degli opposti eserciti lungo l'alto corso dell'Isonzo alle ore 2 del 24 ottobre 1917

AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN DEPLOYMENT



Schieramento austriaco

GRUPPO KRAUSS

1-10 3ª div. Edelweiss (A. U.)
11-21 22ª div. Schützen (A. U.)
22-32 55ª div. (A. U.)
33-41 div. Jäger (G.)

GRUPPO STEIN

42-53 50ª div. (A. U.)
54-62 12ª div. Slesia (G.)
63-72 div. Alpenkorps
73-81 117ª div. (G.)

GRUPPO BERRER

82-92 200ª div. (G.)
93-101 26ª div. (G.)

GRUPPO SCOTTI

102-112 1ª div. (A. U.)
113-121 5ª div. (G.)

The same reasons had led the British to adopt exactly the opposite conduct. Since the French could not go over to the attack, the British would keep the Germans occupied during the summer and autumn; consequently they too could not assist the Italians.

While a few Allied divisions would have achieved much on the Isonzo, every British division concentrated before Passchendaele to fight the saddest battle history remembers, "against the Huns and the mud", was bled white without restraint and without achieving anything.

The Battle of Passchendaele, or Third Ypres, had begun on 1 August beneath torrential rain after a month of blazing sunshine. Before the end of the month seventy-four thousand men had been consumed, against only fifty thousand German losses. At the beginning of September everyone was alarmed except Douglas Haig, for whom matters were going "fairly well". His Intelligence Service helped him think so by attributing a fantastic number of casualties to the Germans. Not everyone was deceived: Pétain made heavy jokes at the expense of the head of British intelligence, the Scottish General John Charteris, who "killed the Boches too quickly".

The offensive in the lowlands therefore continued, swallowing an astonishing quantity of lives. The Battle of the Menin Road was fought on 20 September: eight hundred metres of advance and twenty-two thousand men lost in one day. Polygon Wood followed on the 26th: one thousand metres and seventeen thousand casualties. On 4 October came the Battle of Zonnebeke: seven hundred metres and twenty-six thousand men lost. The worst occurred on 8 and 9 October at Poelcappelle, where twenty thousand men were sacrificed for virtually no territorial gain. The suicidal attacks continued.

Then came Caporetto. Douglas Haig's reaction was a conditioned reflex: no one must think of taking divisions away from him and sending them to assist the Italians. He later agreed with bad grace because he could do nothing else. Yet he managed to crown his programme, which culminated on 6 November with the capture of Passchendaele village, 6,500 metres from the line where the offensive had begun on 1 August. From that date to the end of November, the officially reported losses of the British Army on the Western Front amounted to 360,000 men.

Who, then, could help Italy, over which the Austro-German threat was gathering? Not the French, who were physically unable. Not the British, occupied elsewhere. The Americans? They had not yet arrived. The Russians? On 21 October Sonnino asked the Russian ambassador for at least a "demonstration" that might serve as a scarecrow. Certainly, came the answer, we shall arrange it immediately. But the message, swallowed by the Sarmatian spaces, disappeared into darkness.

Meanwhile the Boselli Cabinet was living through its final days. It was bitterly criticised from the left for its warmongering attitude and equally from the right for its soft, pacifist weakness.

The Chamber reopened on 16 October, and for several days many speakers followed one another at the rostrum. Several ministers and the Prime Minister himself offered examples of measured eloquence. They received applause from every quarter, while motions against them were prepared in every quarter.

The Austro-German threat on the Isonzo front was growing increasingly acute. The press prepared public opinion for the coming events in the only way believed to offer the best guarantee of success: by underestimating the adversary.

> "The enemy operation cannot be explained," Luigi Barzini wrote on 19 October. "Considered technically, it would appear one of the most imprudent errors."

Even the Duke of Aosta was more cautious when, three days later, addressing the airmen, he spoke of "a whirlwind gathering over our front to break our impetus, our faith and our pride", naturally adding that it was awaited without fear.

On the afternoon of 24 October, the Minister of War, General Giardino, was to speak at Montecitorio. The possibility of discharging several older classes for the autumn agricultural work was under discussion. The Minister of War was firmly determined to oppose the proposal and argued against it in his speech. Between one stage and another of his reasoning, he had occasion to mention the enemy offensive which Cadorna's morning communiqué had announced as certain.

The chamber was crowded and the public galleries still more densely packed. Everyone listened attentively and with unconcealed anxiety, including ministers and deputies who during four months had submerged Giardino beneath fourteen thousand recommendations for safe billets.

> You will have read in the newspapers, Giardino exclaimed, that there is talk of an enemy offensive in which German troops would participate. It is certain that they are in Tyrol and probably on the Isonzo as well. A Prussian was recently fished dead from the current of that river. The enemy knows of our preparation, but watches for any cracks in the front in which to plant his sword and burst the block apart... Let the attack come. We do not fear it.

It was about six in the evening. Thunderous applause echoed from every side. Every deputy except the official Socialists rose and continued acclaiming him for a long time. Hundreds of hands reached towards the Minister who had restored their courage, almost wishing to touch him to verify that he was not a hallucination.

- Post it! Post it! voices cried from every side at the height of enthusiasm.

It was decreed that the speech should be posted in every municipality in Italy. "The delirium of applause," wrote the Corriere della Sera, "was matched only by the days of May 1915."

Not to be outdone by the elected representatives, the senior officials of the Ministry of War decided to pay homage to Giardino by sending a basket to his office containing the visiting cards of more than three thousand employees. Anyone who dared object was silenced and regarded severely.

When the Minister returned to his office, however, he had a choice between reading this avalanche of courtier-like cards and a telegram from the Supreme Command. He chose the telegram first.

It contained bad news - indeed, disastrous news. The "unthreatening" German troops had already opened the crack in our front and were spreading in every direction from Saga, Caporetto and Jeza. The Isonzo front was in danger. Italy was in danger.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CAPORETTO

Don Alberto Garaventa, lieutenant chaplain of the Dronero Battalion, had been beneath Rombon for many months and was familiar with everyone. His predecessors had accustomed the large Alpini to the presence of a priest in the trench, of "the fellow with the oil and the cage". One of those predecessors had been sealed there for eternity inside a cave when a heavy shell caused its entrance to collapse.

Garaventa did not treat himself more elegantly than the men entrusted to him. He slept in a cave excavated beneath a war cemetery, from which a foul liquid dripped steadily, its tapping providing the soundtrack to nights already enlivened by the bites of lice.

Together with the Saluzzo and Borgo San Dalmazzo Battalions, the Dronero formed Group Rombon under Colonel Cantoni. The Alpini kingdom began above the one-thousand-metre contour, where they rubbed shoulders with the 88th Infantry, whose 1st Battalion reached that height. On the left, however, they were connected with no one and the occupation ended on the Rombon-Canin ridge. The route beyond was so inaccessible that the war did not resume until Val Raccolana.

No important operation had occurred in the Rombon sector since May. Yet the Dronero, like the other battalions, was exhausted by ten tormenting uninterrupted months in the trenches, relieved by no period of rest. The position was among the most uncomfortable. The summit itself, Point 2208, remained in enemy hands and had always been stubbornly defended. Our trenches enclosed the summit of Cukla and crowded as far as possible beneath the Austrian positions - beneath them in the literal sense, since the hundred metres separating the opponents were often vertical.

A great concentration of matériel surrounded the massif. Caves lay everywhere, sheltering artillery that duelled with the opposing batteries. Victory consisted in placing a direct hit inside the enemy cave, where the shell's concussion would destroy gun and crew.

Another German-speaking Rombon group had prepared to attack the Italian Group Rombon. Its men spoke the dialects of Salzburg and Upper Austria, the regions supplying replacements to the 59th Regiment. That regiment, together with a battalion of Kaiserjäger, was entrusted with capturing the massif. These troops belonged to the 3rd Edelweiss Division and had come from the Folgaria plateau in Trentino.

For several days the Alpini group had been warned of a possible enemy offensive and advised to discard useless or excessively confidential papers. After the false alarm on the 23rd, the attack was certainly expected during the night before the 24th. The Ceva Battalion, held as divisional reserve north of Saga, was ordered to garrison the village of Plusne with its 4th Company. The mule track to Rombon began there.

This was the weak point at the end of the Italian deployment. Almost five thousand men depended entirely upon that single path. If its root fell - barely three kilometres from the forward lines - the Alpini group would have no escape except an Arctic march across the Prevaia saddle to the frozen Canin massif.

The night before the 24th promised to be dark and forbidding: rain below and sleet on the heights. A storm raged through the mountain gorges and the guns remained silent. Dense fog rose from the valley floor, progressively isolating the summits from the Isonzo.

The chaplain remained for a long time in the small battalion-headquarters hut for the customary card game with the medical lieutenant. Both felt uneasy, and shortly before two o'clock they reached the dressing station of the 19th Company. At that moment a shell of a calibre previously known only from registration fire opened the enemy bombardment, which continued relentlessly, apart from a brief pause around six, until eight in the morning.

Communication trenches, fighting trenches and communications were overturned. Runners began to be dispatched, many disappearing for ever amid the hail of shells, while the first wounded flowed and the first dead were deposited at the dressing station.

At about four the gas alarm sounded. From the Plezzo basin a greenish mass of cloud boiled towards the higher ground, gradually invading caves and huts. Masks were put on immediately, and within fifteen minutes anyone wearing one was in an advanced state of congestion.

The chaplain was about to tear his off when the battalion commander saw the attempt and rebuked him severely. Did he not know the orders? Had he not read the instructions? Yet a fat goose which the Major had received as a gift two days earlier, and which he had not had time to teach the regulations, continued pecking at the grass, apparently unaware that asphyxiating gas polluted the air. At the sight, everyone removed his mask by common consent. A strong wind blew on Rombon and the gas had arrived so diluted as to be harmless.

The Austrian Group Rombon prepared to attack during the first hours of the morning. The bombardment of the Italian lines had apparently produced little effect, but the requested postponement was granted too late, after the assault patrols had already left to open four gaps per battalion in the Italian wire with gelignite tubes and cutters.

Jäger vor!

The fate of those columns was melancholy. An avalanche, unbalanced by a fortunate shell from our artillery, buried one and swept the bodies down the valley. Another patrol diligently cutting the barbed wire with wire cutters was driven back with heavy losses by a hail of hand grenades. A machine gun emplaced during the night in no man's land tried in vain to defend the bold men. One by one the gun crew were killed, and the officer commanding it remained to operate the weapon personally with a single assistant. He later received the highest decoration for his heroic conduct, but this did not prevent him from having to withdraw at that moment.

Driven against the ropes, the Austrian Command displayed the same fundamental vices as the Italian: many exhortations and little assistance. Advance at all costs, take Cukla at any price, and so forth. Climbers, engineers and Sturmpatrouillen returned to the task four times, displaying exceptional athletic courage among the steep cliffs, but without result.

At half past twelve, fifty per cent of the first-echelon troops were out of action, the caves were filled with freezing wounded, and continuation was impossible. The attack had to be postponed until better times. There was even reason to fear a counter-attack after the Italian artillery resumed furious fire. The Austrian commander could not reconcile himself to the reverse: a fine way to begin the offensive.

What happened on Rombon was nevertheless a thousand miles removed from events on the valley floor only three kilometres away, where other troops under General Krauss attacked towards Saga. From time to time the men above heard machine-gun bursts and confused sounds of fighting from below. Their attention was distracted by the strong progress made among the gas-stricken soldiers of the Friuli Brigade.

After passing over them, by late morning the 3rd Edelweiss Division was already before Plusne, around which the 4th Company of the Ceva Battalion was deployed after surviving a night march through clouds of gas. The company commander was killed in fierce fighting and the defenders almost exterminated. At about noon Plusne fell into enemy hands, meaning that food and ammunition could no longer reach the defenders of Rombon.

They learned this at two in the afternoon, when several Alpini sent to escort prisoners down into the valley returned breathlessly to warn that Austrian and German supply columns were marching towards Saga, from which the roar of battle came. By four o'clock General Montuori, appointed by Capello to command the left wing of the Second Army, had authorised the possible withdrawal of the 50th Division into the Uccea valley, abandoning the defile.

Although unaware of the authorisation, General Arrighi had initially sent a runner to Group Rombon with an order to counter-attack, which never arrived. Later, misled by inaccurate reports that the Krasij positions had been broken, he independently reached the same decision and prepared to withdraw the remaining forces onto the Stol massif.

At about six, as evening shadows appeared over the scene of the first day's battle, Colonel Cantoni realised that he had no route of escape unless he immediately undertook the march towards Canin. The Rombon sector command therefore ordered the three Alpini battalions:

> ... to withdraw towards the Prevaia saddle along the Eagle ridge, since our rear areas are already in enemy hands, and halt upon the Canin line for resistance to the bitter end against the invader.

A few determined men were left to make a noise in the old positions and confuse the suspicious Austrians. Indeed, only on the morning of the 25th did units of the 59th Regiment cautiously approach the Cukla trenches, discover them empty and occupy them.

The march of the Dronero, Saluzzo and Borgo San Dalmazzo Battalions towards Canin rapidly became a small tragedy. The cold was intense and many soldiers were unprotected against it, some still wearing summer canvas uniforms. The route was unknown and rocky. From time to time a man vanished into a crevasse, swallowed by treacherous snowfields. Others, wounded or weakened, stopped to rest briefly and never rose again, immobilised by frost.

In the distance the fog glowed red from enormous fires, and the Alpine village of Serpenizza was a sea of flame. Austrian detachments advancing from Plusne now pressed upon their rear towards Goricina Piattina, while other patrols headed for Canin from the Seebach valley.

At dawn on the 25th the Saluzzo Battalion, at the head of the Italian column, had already reached the Prevaia saddle, but the other battalions remained scattered along the route and were harassed by continuous attacks against rear and flanks. They remained crouched throughout the day and resumed the march towards the saddle in the evening, only to find that an Austrian battalion had arrived before them.

Colonel Cantoni succeeded in spilling into Val Raccolana with six or seven hundred men, towards the temporary safety of the Carnia XII Corps rear areas. Most of his soldiers fell into the wolf's jaws, including all three battalion commanders.

Of the Dronero, which had a strength of fully fifteen hundred men, several hundred were killed or wounded - under those conditions even a minor wound meant death within a short time - about fifty escaped, and all the others were captured after losing food and ammunition.

This did not occur without fighting. Until 28 October the Alpini defended themselves under extremely

difficult conditions, withdrawing step by step from the Prevaia saddle to Canin and attempting in vain to open a route towards Val Resia.

Don Garaventa was among the few fortunate survivors of the Dronero. After escaping through the meshes of the encirclement, he too reached the Pontebba road, continuously pursued by enemy detachments, and within about fifteen days reached the Venetian plain.

Amid the general collapse the resistance of Group Rombon went unnoticed. The Frankfurter Zeitung of 6 December 1917, with a slight alteration of the truth, described Rombon as having been taken by assault. At Italian headquarters some maintained that the three Alpini battalions had surrendered or even gone over to the enemy.

The survivors returning from captivity discovered that no one knew of them, of what they had done or how much they had suffered. In the general chaos contact with three battalions had been lost - that was all. So many had disappeared that one more or less made no difference.

Officer cadet Giovanni Comisso, responsible for the telephone exchange at 50th Division headquarters, was living rather well. There were comfortable huts furnished with rustic furniture made by craftsmen possessing no small artistic talent; excellent officers' mess and rations, both because the provisions were conveniently supplemented by the divisional vegetable garden and chicken run and because of the skill of the cook, trained in one of Rome's finest trattorias; a good climate, though rather damp; little work and less risk.

The report, communicated almost officially by the Supreme Command in a telegram of 23 October, that the enemy offensive would begin at two during the night was consequently received by the telephone operators with the irritated expression of men learning that they were to be dismissed from a good position.

At two in the morning there was no need to sound reveille for the engineer company. The dull roar of the guns echoed through the mountain gorges and red flashes shone through the windows. When the telephone rang, the receiver was lifted: news came from Maritza.

Maritza was an extremely advanced observation post, almost beyond the lines, located on a small rise on the valley floor. At that moment it was manned by a Milanese idler sent there as punishment, who performed his duty with the swagger and punctiliousness of a criminal:

> At two o'clock a red rocket was seen rising at the end of the valley, after which the Austrian artillery opened destructive fire which is still continuing.

Taken as a whole, the bombardment did not appear as terrifying as feared. Kirghis - Colonel Boccacci - called insistently from Army Corps headquarters and was reassured. At one point the enemy appeared to be using gas, but an inspection in the line found the soldiers at their posts, fully armed.

Towards morning the character of the bombardment changed and it grew denser as the assault approached. Shortly afterwards Maritza telephoned:

> The Austrians have left their trenches. We can see them advancing through the fog. They are crossing the wire. We are withdrawing.

Another observation post reported that at the doctor's hut beneath Rombon the enemy had already left the trenches and was marching upon Plezzo. Was it true? Was it false? Before ordering Concentration 14 from all our guns, it was prudent to investigate.

The investigation showed the report was true, but when the salvos of Concentration 14 reached the doctor's hut the Austrians had already gone. At that point the Friuli Brigade discovered that its left wing had evaporated, its soldiers dissolved into nothingness by the Gaswerfer.

Within four days the Austrians had secretly transported and organised the entire network of pipes. At about three in the morning a strange rumbling, an unusual sound, was heard. Shortly afterwards a dense wave of gas filled the valley floor. In the light of the rockets, milky clouds could be seen as though the earth had opened and released powerful blowholes. It was an atrocious fog, a carefully prepared mixture of phosgene and diphenylchloroarsine that burned the lungs.

When the Austrians crossed the trenches of the 87th Infantry, a scene of Dantesque horror appeared before them. Hundreds of poisoned bodies lay in rows, upon which artillery and trench mortars had continued firing uselessly. Even in crevices protected from the fire, the slaughter was complete. Lieutenant Weber writes:

> ... In large, strongly constructed shelters and in caves lie about eight hundred men. All dead. A few, caught while fleeing, fell face down upon the ground. Most are curled against the shelter walls, their rifles between their knees, uniforms and equipment intact.
>
> In a kind of hut there are forty more bodies. Near the entrance lie the officers, NCOs and two telephone operators with their headsets still attached, a pad of paper before them and pencils in hand... They did not even attempt to use their masks. They must have died without understanding what was happening.
>
> A little farther on we reach a cave whose entrance is masked by a row of sandbags. We open a passage and enter, sending the cones of light from our lamps along the damp walls. At the back we see a kind of store of weapons and clothing. In the innermost corner, however, lies a tangle of bodies. Yellow lines and livid faces emerge from the darkness... These men certainly heard the breath of the gas cylinders!

For a long time nothing was known of the massacre suffered by the 87th Infantry Regiment. Although gas bombardment was reported almost everywhere, the fact that compressed gas had been released from cylinders in the Plezzo sector escaped attention.

When General Cadorna published La guerra alla fronte italiana in 1921, he therefore knew none of the episode's details and judged the breakthrough at Plezzo "deplorable", although "remediable". General Viganò, who published another history of our war in 1920 written in a ferociously anti-Cadorna key and would therefore have found it useful to recall the gassed men of the 87th Infantry, was equally silent.

Even after the event became known, it was not properly understood. In 1933 General Adriano Alberti, describing the breakthrough at Plezzo, spoke of Gaswerfer that "opened fire" and transformed the ground between Plezzo and the Isonzo into a vast cemetery "with their terrible projectiles".

When the 22nd Schützen Division and half of the 3rd Edelweiss drove like a wedge into the valley floor, few defenders possessed the strength to improvise resistance. Several surviving machine-gun nests were quickly eliminated. The commanders of the Friuli Brigade and the 87th Regiment were wounded, and the Austro-Hungarians struck the second line, which was taken before noon. Before the third line, a little in front of Saga, the enemy marked time during mid-afternoon.

For a while General Arrighi, commander of the 50th Division, believed he could control events. An order to counter-attack was sent to Group Rombon, but never arrived. The reports then worsened in an increasingly alarming crescendo. Tall and white-haired, with a woollen scarf around his neck, the General had the expression of a man who feels his family collapsing around him.

Through the artillery telephone network the final stages of the drama could be followed:

- The guns are firing over open sights.
- The gunners are defending themselves with hand grenades and carbines.
- We have removed the breechblocks and are withdrawing.

"I left the telephone," Giovanni Comisso writes, "with a shiver running through my head." Looking from the headquarters window, he saw a great crowd streaming along the road: soldiers from every branch, some without caps and some without rifles, their eyes burning and faces transformed, the characteristic appearance of battle shock. A wounded artillery officer, bleeding from one eye, was carried in men's arms. Among them came several German soldiers, free, brisk and unarmed.

A staff officer began shouting. Seeing an unfortunate captain nearby, he ordered him to stop the crowd and told him he would answer for its arrest "personally". The captain stood before them with arms spread, in vain.

- Shoot, shoot! Have you no revolver?

But the captain pretended not to hear.

Telephone communication with neighbouring formations was now beginning to fail, and the links with Army Corps headquarters were also broken. Shortly after three, however, from a line believed permanently silent, Colonel Boccacci's voice was intercepted:

- Speak, speak, quickly!
- We have withdrawn to Dreženca and are waiting.
- Speak, speak...
- General Farisoglio instructs me to tell you that the Austrians have this moment reached the cemetery at Caporetto.

Carried there by a caprice of accidental contacts, the voices vanished into silence as though swept away by the wind. Comisso rushed to the General, bearer of the unwelcome news. The Chief of Staff refused to believe him and called him hallucinated and mad, until a captain present defended him:

- Why should this boy come here inventing such things? It would be pleasant if we could disbelieve him.

An ambulance returning shortly afterwards from the Caporetto road, where it had been fired upon, supplied the unwelcome confirmation.

The position of the 50th Division was not yet desperate. Group Rombon still held; sufficient troops remained to defend the Saga line; and the defenders of the southern bank of the Isonzo and Polounig - two battalions of the 88th Infantry and the Argentera Alpini Battalion - had not yielded.

Along with many true bad reports, however, General Arrighi received one false bad report: the Krasij defences had collapsed and the enemy was pouring towards the Isonzo and Ternova from that direction as well. Had the report been true, it could not have produced a worse effect, because it frightened Arrighi and induced him to abandon the Saga defile prematurely. It was an unexpected gift of time and men to the Austrians.

With the easy arrogance of the victor, General Krafft von Dellmensingen judged General Arrighi very severely:

> ... I find it extremely difficult to believe that after the first line near Plezzo was broken, not even a single leader and a modest reserve could be found to bar the narrow pass of Saga, formed by a rocky gorge no wider than the road. A handful of men and a single machine gun would have been sufficient.

The abandonment of Saga and consequently of the Caporetto road as far as Ternova was ordered at six in the evening and was to be executed during the night. It had the effect of permanently isolating Group Rombon, the troops on the southern bank of the Isonzo and a considerable part of the 43rd Division, which had only hours remaining to withdraw across the Ternova bridge.

The new line descending from Monte Guardia into the Uccea valley and climbing again to Prvi Hum and Stol was much weaker and less defended than the line abandoned. Worse still, Stol, the pivot of the Army line, was suddenly attacked within twenty-four hours. Although General Arrighi informed the 36th Division by telephone of the withdrawal under way, the connection between IV and XII Corps became increasingly uncertain and distant.

Throughout the day the light remained like that of a northern twilight, removing all sense of time. As darkness fell beneath fine rain, soldiers began moving in groups and crowds while ammunition dumps exploded.

The road from Saga to Hum was wide and spacious, allowing large guns and lorries to pass freely. It possessed only one disadvantage: it had not been completed and ended abruptly above the precipice of a stream. There was no choice except to throw guns, lorries and carts into the valley below rather than leave them intact for the attackers, who nevertheless captured substantial booty.

General Müller, commander of the 22nd Schützen Division, wrote:

> [The Italians] lost [their artillery] because our fire prevented them from taking the Saga-Serpenizza road. The Italian artillery was sent along the extremely bad road through the Uccea valley, where it became stuck and fell into our hands on 26 October. It would be highly interesting to know by whom and for what reasons the order to withdraw the Italian artillery was issued.

The divisional headquarters halted only briefly at Hum. While Officer Cadet Comisso and his men wandered through the surrounding area looking for an unobtainable telephone connection with the Carnia sector, the Austrians shelled the headquarters and forced it rapidly to abandon the exposed position.

When Comisso returned, only a rearguard stood between Hum and the first Austrian units. Defence of Monte Stol therefore also appeared precarious. The number of stragglers continued to grow, especially artillerymen without guns and service troops flowing into the rear, supplying unmistakable and even exaggerated evidence of rout.

At Nimis, after long wandering, Comisso found his unit again:

> ... I saw a great crowd of soldiers advancing along the road, with officers mixed among them. Disarmed, without equipment, dazed and driven forward, they advanced and passed me. I watched them one by one.
>
> "Where have you come from?" No one answered.
>
> I recognised an officer from the Naradelie batteries. I stopped him cheerfully, but he made me understand that a different manner was required.
>
> "But where are you going?"
>
> "This is our whole division. Every gun is lost. We resisted until last night on the Hum-Monte Maggiore line, but what could we do? We had no cartridges left and fought with stones."
>
> "And the headquarters and the General?"

"Who knows? Who has seen them?"

In the garden of a villa several generals were arguing angrily. I went to see whether my General was among them and ventured to present myself and ask for news. One man holding a map gestured for me to go away and resumed attacking the other General with whom he was speaking:

"No, no, my dear fellow. No, and again no. There will be an inquiry and it will become perfectly clear that I did everything it was possible to do."

Two others stood with folded arms waiting for him to calm down so that they could close upon him with the objections they appeared to be maturing...

The struggle to escape responsibility, to seek salvation if necessary at the expense of colleagues' errors, had begun: à la guerre comme à la guerre.

Although an Italian division bearing the number 34 had existed since the first day of the war, on 24 October 1917 the headquarters and troops of the 34th Division did not know one another at all. The headquarters, arriving from the Karst, had wandered for several days before being finally assigned to IV Army Corps. Its infantry consisted of the Foggia Brigade, the 280th, 281st and 282nd Regiments, which after its beating beneath San Gabriele had been replenished with fifteen hundred assorted replacements.

By transferring the 34th Division to IV Corps for employment at the Saga defile, Cadorna hoped to take out a second insurance policy against bad fortune. This could appear easy from Supreme Command headquarters, where the only effort required to move a brigade consisted of shifting a small flag held between thumb and forefinger.

In practice, the effort required was much greater; rapid movements produced considerable disruption in subordinate headquarters, while unexpected departures for an unknown destination always had a chilling effect upon soldiers' morale.

Cadorna's intentions were not fully obeyed. Instead of sending the Foggia to the Saga defile, Colonel Boccacci planned to use it as Army Corps reserve, as he explained to the divisional staff on the morning of the 23rd. In the end he nibbled it into fragments used as divisional reserves.

This was its final distribution. From the Cividale area two battalions of the 280th were transported by lorry to Saga during the night before the 23rd; the 281st was transported to Luico during the day; and the 282nd was quartered near Caporetto during the night before the 24th. The remaining battalion of the 280th stood at Cividale but had already been assigned to the Saga defile.

The 34th Division headquarters remained at Suzit - a hamlet of a few dilapidated houses three kilometres west of Caporetto - until the night before the 24th, leaving for Caporetto at four in the morning while the bombardment was already raging.

The weather was fit for wolves. Rain fell in torrents, and where there was no deluge the fog was exceedingly dense. Arriving in the town with the other staff officers, Captain Attilio Frescura had time to witness the precipitate withdrawal of the priestesses employed in the local brothel. Half dressed and distraught, they wandered through the mud in golden high-heeled shoes.

Frescura does not say why they wished to flee. Perhaps they feared that the Germans might carry out the semi-serious proposal to shoot every syphilitic prostitute found in occupied territory, a measure that would have caused a massacre, since syphilis was a fashionable disease and widely infected soldiers and women following the army.

They escaped this uncertain death because, in good time, a senior figure succeeded in obtaining a pair of motor cars for the Bolognese madam and her vestals, enabling them to precede the horde of fugitives.

The inhabitants of Caporetto had abandoned their houses and sought shelter on the surrounding heights. Silent and dark-eyed, they watched the Italian soldiers, who waited unconsciously for the approaching storm from which the local population expected "liberation".

Throughout the night and early morning shells continued falling upon Caporetto, Robic and Creda. The final troop movements took place amid rain and bombs: the 3rd Battalion of the 280th transported by lorry to Saga, while the 281st and 282nd Regiments were led to Caporetto at dawn and camped along the left bank of the Isonzo north of the iron bridge, in an area protected from bombardment.

Later in the day Colonel-Brigadier Pisani, commander of the Foggia, received orders to move with the 282nd towards Saga to plug the gap opening in the sector of the 50th Division. The 281st was to remain in place.

The 282nd recrossed the Isonzo and was about to move up the bank when a counter-order stopped it. Since General Arrighi believed he could manage alone, the reinforcements were no longer required. The calm was brief. Another Army Corps order overturned the regiment's fate: at great speed the 282nd was to recross onto the left bank of the Isonzo and place itself at the disposal of the 46th Division in order to check and counter-attack the enemy.

If that proved impossible, it was to deploy upon the Army line before Ladra, sending one battalion to the other side of the Isonzo across the Idersko bridge but maintaining contact with the 281st, which meanwhile would garrison the Volnik trenches.

Apparently no one was concerned with preserving the strength of this or other regiments which, since reveille sounded, had been exercised by four or five hours of marching. The gravity of the reports from the right of the 46th Division, now far above the danger level, prevented such sanitary considerations.

What had become of IV Army Corps' reserves? The Foggia was committed; the 2nd and 9th Bersaglieri Regiments, also nominally assigned to the 34th Division, were committed; the Alpini battalions were committed. Nothing remained immediately available, while the Potenza and Massa Carrara Brigades and VII Alpini Group were still far away.

From where could IV Corps receive further unforeseen threats requiring reserves to be instantly available? Perhaps from the right bank of the Isonzo? There was half a battalion at Idersko - and besides, it was impossible. Two defensive lines held by the 19th Division, the whole Napoli Brigade at the Foni defile, as everyone believed, and VII Army Corps ready like a wildcat to counter-attack down from the mountains towards the valley floor. No concern was therefore felt in that direction.

The enemy bombardment itself had diminished in intensity, encouraging hope of a temporary respite.

General Basso, commander of the 34th Division, instructed Attilio Frescura to carry to the 282nd the order to move towards Ladra. What Frescura saw made his heart sink: what an infernal mess, to use the strong military expression.

> Running through the downpour from the town to the bridge with the guide soldier, who wished me to fly - "I warn you, Captain, sir, they are shooting here!" - and saluted by two fine shells that sent us unharmed rolling into the muddy ditch, I had already gained an impression of disorder and the absence of a directing mind...
>
> On the road running from Monte Nero to Dreženca the reinforcements could not pass, blocked by an endless column of carts, lorries, tractors, guns and mules attempting to climb and attempting to

descend.

Only on the eve of battle had the order been issued to remove the impedimenta. Too late. During battle this gives the impression of flight, clogs the roads, prevents reinforcements arriving and encourages their disintegration.

After setting the regiment in motion and making certain that it had begun, I returned to say that I did not believe it would ever reach its destination. In fact it never did...

At noon the head of the regiment had already reached Ladra, while at one in the afternoon the tail had still to cross the bridge. Immobilised in this way, the column could move neither forward nor back when a rumour spread and added panic to chaos:

- The Germans are at the Idersko bridge!

At the same time a wave of fugitives coming from the south flooded into the town. How the enemy had succeeded in reaching that point, in the heart of IV Army Corps, was inexplicable. They had passed across two defensive lines - lines always described as exceedingly strong - in complete surprise and absolute silence.

Every condition existed for the confusion around the Caporetto bridge to become rapidly inextricable. Men and objects now formed a compact mass. However many vehicles were thrown into the river to clear the road, others arrived from both directions, while a second wave of fugitives, these from the rear services of the 46th Division and mostly unarmed, crowded at the entrance to the narrow passage.

An engineer party was meanwhile mining the Caporetto bridge beneath the anguished eyes of soldiers driven towards the enemy. At its western end a lieutenant colonel shouted at the top of his voice that everyone must move forward. On the other side a captain, pistol in hand, cried like a madman:

Back! Back!

Back, everyone, including those who wish to go forward!

Looking at that terrible madman, I saw what we had now become...

At Caporetto I found the Chief of Staff [35], who ordered me and the others to check the wave of fugitives which was now spreading and overwhelming everything.

We began the struggle in the streets. We stopped anyone with a rifle. Anyone without one was to continue so as not to obstruct the road. But then those farther away, seeing the manoeuvre, threw down their rifles. Ah, life! Each of us lives upon condition of an act of cowardice. By now even genesis is cowardly. Few are the chosen, born of violence, sons of a male. The legality of love has degraded life.

There, the Austrians are in the town. The first rifle shots arrive.

I am alone. The crowd has separated me from the others. Either I shall die or be captured. Unarmed and leaning against a house, I wait. I raise my eyes opposite. The face of a young woman looks out and smiles.

Half-naked women pass screaming. They are the mourners from the tea house. Poor creatures. By now even genesis is cowardly.

The battle is in the streets, but the battle is lost.

An officer from my headquarters finds me and shouts:

"Go, or they will take us!"

I ask:

"But what of the others?"

"Go, go! Everyone away! Run!"

We jump upon the running board of one of our motor cars, in which I see several officers from headquarters again. Around the car a cowardly humanity clings and screams savagely:

"Go! Go!"

Go. Honour too, gone.

As the crackle of rifle fire recedes, I look at my watch: 2:45 p.m.

The Austrians are excessively punctual. They had promised to be at Caporetto by three.

The signs "Halt for everyone - Inspection - Haircut" evidently did not frighten them...

The arrival of the Silesian 12th Division at Idersko and the immediate threat to Caporetto struck like lightning in an already dark sky. The half battalion of the 282nd which, coming from Ladra, had crossed the Isonzo over the wooden bridge attempted in vain to oppose the enemy rush. Caught while deploying, it was overwhelmed after a brief fight.

The local carabinieri post was destroyed to the last man, and the Silesians rushed to capture the bridge. It was set on fire but not destroyed. They could therefore threaten the other Foggia troops from the rear, while at about two o'clock motorised patrols found the road to Caporetto open and spread fanwise towards Svina and Suzit.

For the fourth time the final battalion of the 282nd, the tail of the regiment still stamping impatiently near the western end of the Caporetto bridge, was recalled. General Basso hurriedly deployed it to protect the town and reinforced it with a cavalry squadron and every fugitive he could scrape together.

Threatened with envelopment, these troops broke towards Staroselo and the Natisone valley. Brigadier Pisani was seen moving towards Starijski with a few men, and no further news was received until he was encountered in a concentration camp.

At 3:30 the iron bridge blew up. Impressed by the proximity of the enemy - an Austrian patrol had opened fire upon his demolition party - and lacking orders or instructions from General Cavaciocchi, who personally bore responsibility for destruction of the bridge, Captain Platania took it upon himself to light the fuses.

His decision sealed the fate of many thousands of men: two almost complete Foggia regiments, which suffered about 3,500 missing, most of them prisoners; the remnants of the Alessandria and Caltanissetta Brigades; and the bulk of the troops gathered in the Dreženca basin.

General Farisoglio, commander of the 43rd Division, was also trapped. Accompanied only by his orderly officer, he had crossed the bridge towards Caporetto to ask his superiors for assistance and enlightenment. Instead of his superiors he found the Germans, who wrapped him up and sent him to the prisoner-of-war camp at Ellwangen.

After capturing Caporetto, the Silesians did not rest upon their laurels but ran towards Staroselo. At the entrance to the Natisone valley, Italian resistance was not particularly stubborn. In a report written for Army Corps headquarters on 6 November, General Basso stated:

> At Staroselo an attempt was made to organise defence of the existing barrier, and officers of divisional headquarters gathered stragglers as they passed, separating armed from unarmed men. The latter were the great majority, partly because the flow consisted of service troops and partly because many soldiers discarded their weapons along the road from Caporetto to Staroselo in order to run more lightly.

In Frescura's account:

> ... We fall back as far as Staroselo, where a line of trenches lies to the west.
>
> Meanwhile, amid the tumult of the enormous procession of men and things in flight, no command exists. The iron will of our Chief of Staff keeps us nailed here, attempting the impossible.
>
> Suddenly the fleeing crowd makes way. A motor car comes like a mad projectile, zigzagging. A horrible spectacle. It is loaded with soldiers, and above them all one man, his abdomen torn open, screams in a terrible voice. At the wheel a corpse drives, its body hanging grotesquely. The phantom car disappears... The macabre vision is over.
>
> Before darkness falls we gather here a machine-gun company and about two hundred men, including a detachment of cavalry. As we march towards Bergogna searching for some sign where the Army Corps might have halted - we possess no further information about it and wish to provide some - I think of those three hundred left there "to die in place", alone in the night against a victorious enemy while the whole army flees.
>
> Three hundred. They will link their courage with that of distant men whose hearts and number they share. Three hundred. Unknown men, drawn from the tumult of panic in which, although carried along by the fleeing crowd, they had not loosened their grip upon the weapon to which they remained firmly joined, like man to horse in the age that produced the vision of the centaur. Three hundred. The names of those men placed there alone to honour the Fatherland will never be known. Each of them has no name. Their name is Italy.

Late in the night Robic and Creda, formerly Army Corps headquarters, also fell into Silesian hands. In the age of trench warfare, when success was measured in hundreds of paces, they had penetrated twenty-five kilometres into enemy territory while fighting continuously.

From their bivouacs on the slopes of Matajur, the Silesians could already see the summit, for whose capture the Kaiser had offered the Pour le Mérite.

Lieutenant Mario Muccini, a twenty-two-year-old veteran, commanded a company of II/147th Infantry, Caltanissetta Brigade, 46th Division.

For several days the battalion had been on alert for the enemy offensive, whose indications were multiplying.

> They say that last night [the night before the 23rd] an Austrian deserter presented himself at our lines carrying the operational order.
>
> At 2 a.m., bombardment; at 6, attack; at 8, on the valley floor; at noon, in Caporetto.

- And what are we here for? Spigo comments.

> But a strange feeling of uneasiness has already taken possession of us all. The calm surrounding us, the at least apparent tranquillity of the headquarters, the mocking disbelief accorded to the gravest

> rumours, the confidence ostentatiously displayed in positions whose fragility we alone know, the morale of the troops, the oppressive inactivity in which the units are held and, at the same time, the continual state of alarm disorient and oppress us.

The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Maurizio Piscicelli, a tall, lean Neapolitan who came from the cavalry, had assumed command on 19 October. Within a few hours the diligence he displayed had won the sympathy of his subordinates.

On the evening of the 23rd the battalion was near Kamno in divisional reserve. Gathered in the mess, the officers listened to the Colonel recalling the wonders of a journey he had made in the Congo. An atmosphere of merriment prevailed among those tormented young men, with endless cries of, "Now it is your turn to buy the drinks."

Second Lieutenant Spigo proved particularly generous and at one point ordered Marsala and biscuits for everyone.

- You mean to squander your whole pay! the others shouted.
- Certainly not, Spigo replied. The Colonel will pay, because his collar patches are upside down.

While the truth of the observation was noisily verified, the Colonel was called to the telephone. When he returned with a dark expression, everyone understood that the party was over.

The Colonel issued orders and recommendations. Everyone was to keep his gas mask and reserve rations within reach, since the offensive was now a matter of hours. Muccini was ordered to occupy the approaches to Upper Kamno and send Spigo's platoon across the Isonzo to establish contact with the 19th Division near Osteria.

Austrian fire was sparse and intermittent. A few shells fell upon Kamno and the main road along the Isonzo. At two o'clock, however, precisely as the deserter had predicted, destructive fire opened. Hundreds of guns suddenly awoke and struck, searched, shattered and pulverised everything around them.

- Gas! Masks, masks!

Eyes and throats burned, and a strange smell of rotten grass and bitter almonds spread through the air. Sweating and breathless, Muccini ran back and forth like a sheepdog to make certain that his soldiers had put on their masks and that no one strayed or became lost.

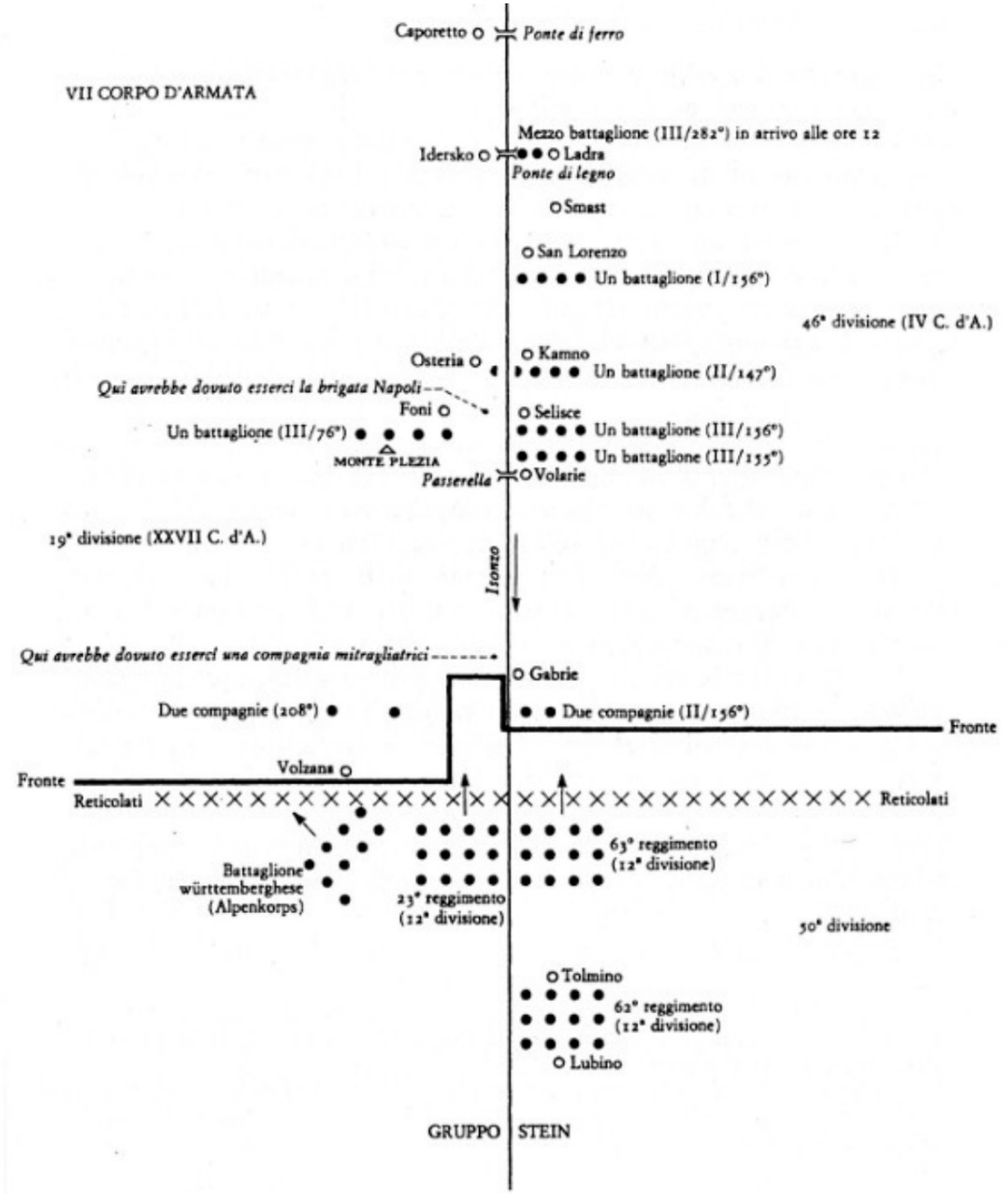
> Gradually a curtain of silence encloses the battalion.
>
> The telephone lines are broken and the exchanges blown up. The runners do not return. We are isolated, no longer communicating with anyone, and no command sends us orders or instructions. The battalion received only one order yesterday evening: resist to the last and do not withdraw.

At dawn the fog rose, enveloping everything and making the positions impossible to decipher. As soon as the gas fire subsided, the battalion was deployed to protect Smast, headquarters of the 46th Division.

Meanwhile the cadence of the enemy artillery slowed and finally ceased. A roar and violent crash were heard from the direction of Mrzli: an Austrian mine had exploded. Work upon it had continued for weeks, and now hundreds of Italian soldiers lay buried.

What Muccini did not know was that at that precise moment the enemy had begun moving from Rombon to Selo along forty kilometres of front, and that one enemy division, General Lequis's Silesian 12th, was heading towards them.

DIAGRAM 10 - ADVANCE OF THE SILESIAN 12TH DIVISION



10. Visione schematica della marcia della 12ª divisione slesiana da Tolmino a Caporetto. In realtà un battaglione del 23° reggimento, dopo essere avanzato sulla sinistra dell'Isonzo, passò sulla destra attraverso la passerella di Volarie. (I dischetti neri indicano la forza di una compagnia. Tutti i battaglioni – tranne il württemberghese dell'Alpenkorps – sono indicati come formati dall'equivalente di quattro compagnie).

The division had begun the attack with modest forces: three battalions on the left bank and three on the right, leaving another three in reserve. The first column was ordered to move at eight in the morning. The second, preceded by the Württemberg battalion of the Alpenkorps, which would later turn towards the Kolovrat, was delayed by one hour.

These troops, and many others besides, had been assembled at Tolmino, whose pre-war population did not reach two thousand but which during the final days had accommodated more than fifty thousand soldiers.

The Austro-German commands had feared that Italian artillery would concentrate destructive fire upon the helpless troops during the hours preceding the assault. They therefore observed the complete absence of Italian reaction with suspicious amazement.

When several shells fell on Tolmino at first light, it was believed that the feared counter-preparation had begun. Captain Sironi, captured the following day, relates:

> An Austrian of Italian race told me that on the morning of the 24th the few Italian shells had caused serious damage and great fear. A concentration of fire would literally have butchered the several divisions waiting in the open inside and around Tolmino for the hour of attack. Instead our artillery remained silent or fired upon the mountain summits.

The programme could therefore proceed without obstruction.

On the Italian side, defence of the Isonzo had been arranged with particular incompetence. On the left bank, protecting Gabrie, stood two companies of the 156th Infantry, Alessandria Brigade. One had to move five kilometres back to find another battalion, III/155th, supported four hundred metres farther uphill by III/156th and one kilometre farther back by II/147th, while I/156th was positioned at San Lorenzo.

Headquarters, artillery and services were scattered among this infantry. Rather than the deployment in depth prescribed by Army headquarters, it resembled a covering line arranged one behind another.

On the right bank of the Isonzo defence was entirely absent: two companies of the 208th Infantry, Taro Brigade, on the observation line before Volzana, one platoon of II/147th near Osteria, and no one at all as far as Caporetto.

As compensation, sixty medium and heavy guns covered the northern slopes of the Kolovrat in order to engage Sleme and Mrzli, while other batteries concentrated around Caporetto kept Monte Nero and Monte Rosso under fire. They could not, however, engage the nearby roads along the Isonzo, which lay outside their arc of fire.

A machine-gun company of the 46th Division had always been deployed along the southern bank of the Isonzo to sweep the northern bank opposite Gabrie and provide protective flanking fire for the two companies of the 156th stationed there. Shortly before the offensive it was removed by written order for mysterious reasons.

The Napoli Brigade of XXVII Corps, which should have held the Plezia-Foni-Isonzo defile, had been drawn much farther back. On Monte Plezia it placed only one battalion, which stretched one miserable company between Foni and the Isonzo without physically touching the riverbank.

The troops and reserves of XXVII and VII Corps were therefore not deployed in depth either, but stood perched on the edge of the Kolovrat overlooking the phantom "Volzana trap".

The first troops to emerge from Tolmino were two companies of the Württemberg Battalion. They were commanded by a young but already well-known German officer, Lieutenant Erwin Rommel, destined in the distant future for a brilliant career and a tragic end.

Rommel crossed the Volzana plain, passed the intact wire, captured an isolated battery and threw himself upon one of our units, which was surrounded and taken prisoner. When the Silesian 23rd Regiment began its advance at nine o'clock, the road lay open before it and not a man was in sight.

The Silesian 63rd Regiment, channelled along the left bank, was less fortunate. Nevertheless, using the tactic of Horatius against the Curiatii - apparently antiquated but highly effective on this occasion - it crushed the isolated pillars of Italian resistance one by one. They struggled separately and were unable to lend one another any support.

A road demolition prepared at Volarie, where the Isonzo gorge was steepest, was not carried out because no one remained to fire the mines. The headquarters of the 156th Infantry was captured.

On the other bank the march proceeded quickly and safely, but did not pass unnoticed despite the exceedingly dense haze. From time to time the fog tore apart and the many Italians swarming over the heights could watch with curiosity several thousand men marching calmly four abreast without any security precautions.

The commander of the 155th Infantry, Alessandria Brigade, was among the first to see the column. According to his own statement to the Commission of Inquiry:

> No artillery fire was directed upon it, and no sign of fighting appeared on the valley floor.
>
> All of us at regimental headquarters thought they could not be enemy troops at that hour and place, and tried to distinguish whether the column consisted of our own men withdrawing or enemy prisoners.
>
> During the few minutes in which the thinner fog permitted observation through field glasses, although still made difficult by the remaining veil, it appeared that some men in the column wore capes, a garment not used by the Austrians. We therefore concluded that the column must consist of enemy prisoners captured by the 19th Division and being conducted to the rear.

They were also seen from the Kolovrat and from Vodil, where a gun was aimed at them in case they were enemies. Yet the battalion commander, II/155th, reasoned himself into believing that the strangers must be prisoners captured by the 19th Division and countermanded the intervention.

Before those men could change their minds, all these units were attacked by the column advancing along the left bank of the Isonzo and overwhelmed with heavy losses.

The Silesian battalions moving up the right bank of the Isonzo thus reached the Foni defile, which should have been defended by the Napoli Brigade. The few Italian troops at Foni did not even notice the Silesians passing beneath their noses, without having to avoid the chevaux-de-frise still lined along the roadside waiting to be placed.

Continuing without meeting a living soul, at about noon the Silesian 23rd Regiment arrived before Kamno near Osteria. There it was seen by II/147th and its commander, Maurizio Piscicelli.

Colonel Piscicelli had been anxious throughout the morning. The exceedingly violent fire lasting many hours, without any apparent Italian reply, and then the silence broken by occasional bursts of rifle fire had disturbed him.

> Still more sinister is the meaning to be given to the crowds of unarmed soldiers descending and running along the mule track. They are fugitives. It is clear that the forward lines in the mountains have yielded, and anguish gnaws at every spirit.

Towards noon the fog thinned and the Isonzo became visible as far as Volzana. Formed troops could be seen marching towards Idersko along the road on the right bank near Osteria.

- They are our own men withdrawing.

A more terrible doubt nevertheless forced its way into their minds. Those soldiers, marching with a rigid step in greatcoats almost reaching their feet, wore helmets resembling those of hoplites, as the Italians described them. They were Germans.

Colonel Piscicelli had the machine guns emplaced and ordered fire. The valley filled with a dark roar. For an instant the German column halted, then re-formed, attacked the Osteria platoon, destroyed it and continued towards Caporetto.

The bulk of II Battalion had no time to intervene. Machine-gun bursts opened behind it. The left-bank column approached confidently and resolutely in groups and sections from a thick stand of trees. Met by violent fire, the attackers fell, re-formed, thickened and advanced from every direction.

> They are already upon the Seventh Company. From among the trees two, three, countless machine guns fire upon us. And they press on, always press on.
>
> Piscicelli is down there alone, seated amid a spread of corpses in the middle of a hornets' nest of bullets that fail to bring him down.
>
> Suddenly he turns his head. His battalion is almost destroyed. He rises, makes a broad gesture with his hand as though summoning the few living men and all the dead, hurls himself against the enemy and disappears into the whirlwind.

The citation for the Gold Medal awarded posthumously to Lieutenant Colonel Maurizio Piscicelli of the Aosta Lancers reads:

> Having assumed command of an infantry battalion, during the tragic hours of desperate resistance he withstood at its head the assault of superior enemy forces. Surrounded and invited to surrender, he replied by ordering the fire intensified. Mortally wounded, he fell upon a machine gun crying: Long live Italy!

The remnants of the battalion withdrew towards Smast.

- Retreat, retreat! an artillery major shouted, descending from Libussina with a crowd of soldiers.

Here, according to one of the very few testimonies that is more than generic, an Italian unit surrendered without fighting. Captain Flores relates:

> A group of men returned from captivity... questioned about the manner in which they had been captured on the morning of 24 October 1917... declared and signed statements that at about nine that morning the battalion had been sent towards Monte Pleka and had temporarily halted near Libussina.
>
> Only a few minutes had passed after the troops reached that position when German units were observed marching in perfect order along the road on the right bank of the Isonzo towards Idersko. The battalion commander, having noticed this, ordered the men not to fire, adding that any attempt was useless because men would be killed without achieving anything.
>
> The Germans were allowed to continue their march undisturbed. The battalion remained at Libussina until shortly after eleven, when other enemy units arrived, to whom the battalion surrendered without resistance.

After overwhelming Piscicelli's battalion, the Silesian 63rd Regiment attacked the headquarters of the 147th Infantry. Colonel Raimondo attempted to defend himself with cyclists and clerks, was gravely wounded and captured.

By then General Amadei, commander of the 46th Division, had also observed the Germans arriving at Idersko, where he tried in vain to counter-attack with half a battalion of the 282nd Infantry. He himself withdrew rapidly to Ladra and afterwards to Caporetto.

Units retreating in search of orders from divisional headquarters found the villa empty and silent, with papers scattered everywhere and furniture smashed, evidence of a rapid abandonment.

Ladra was congested with artillery matériel and supplies and could not contain the stragglers. Troops flowing into it were directed across the iron bridge towards Caporetto, while the Foggia Brigade struggled to advance against the current.

Muccini witnessed the same demoralising spectacle described by Frescura:

> Machine guns crackle from the direction of Idersko. Just outside Ladra we must proceed in single file beside a column of troops moving forward with difficulty. At Caporetto the spectacle is terrible and impressive. The surviving troops and services of an entire Army Corps in collapse flow there in disorder, fill the roads and block every exit...

Muccini too, with about ten soldiers who had escaped death or capture, ended at the Robic defile, where the final resistance was to be attempted. Suddenly one voice, ten voices, countless voices rose and spread malignantly:

- The Austrians! Run, run!

> I remain alone with Benvenuto upon the road. Senior officers crowd upon a motor car, jostling and pushing one another in their haste. The car roars away, with men loaded even upon the running boards.
>
> A mob of scattered men arrives: the last ones... I hear a soldier shouting: "The war's over!"

The Austro-Germans did not intend to make a serious offensive attack along the arc of Monte Nero. Their purpose was rather to keep the opposing Italian forces engaged so that, by preventing reserves from moving inside the salient, the planned battle could develop more easily.

From Polounig to Sleme the attackers were therefore weaker than the defenders, about fifteen battalions against twenty-five Italian battalions. Nevertheless, since the Austrian 55th Division and part of the 50th took their thankless diversionary task very seriously, the offensive opened harshly and violently even upon those wild mountains.

It was the merit of the Italian infantry, poorly rewarded, that resistance there was on the whole successful, even though here too, as elsewhere, artillery support almost entirely failed.

The weak reaction of our guns was an inexplicable and welcome surprise to General Gerzabek, commander of the Austro-Hungarian 50th Division, half of which had the fundamental rather than diversionary task of breaking our lines between Sleme and the Isonzo.

The terrible weather and hostile geography prevented the attack beginning before half past nine in the morning. Taken as a whole, the right wing of the 50th Division, the 43rd Division and the left wing of the 46th withstood the blow reasonably well.

Only I/97th Infantry, Genova Brigade, was taken prisoner under uncertain circumstances, perhaps those described in this brief account by Vittorio Pallù [36]:

> I fought in the area... of the lower Ursig ridge, to the left of Monte Nero and the Camperi summit. These positions were held by the Genova Brigade, the 97th and 98th Infantry Regiments: excellent positions which we could have defended even without weapons, so to speak, by simply throwing stones.
>
> No enemies were seen before us. Then they appeared behind us, and nothing remained except to raise our hands and surrender.
>
> The artillery had fired only a few shots, then silence...

The Etna Brigade, in the trenches between Monte Nero and Sleme, was also violently attacked. Beneath its positions, as on Mrzli, the Austrians exploded a powerful mine. Despite heavy losses, approximately seven hundred dead and wounded, the brigade's two regiments held their stubbornly defended positions until evening.

An Alpini battalion thrown into a counter-attack recaptured Monte Rosso, which had been lost through the mine explosion. Encouragement came from the presence in the second line of the 2nd and 9th Bersaglieri Regiments, which had reached Dreženca during the evening of the 23rd after wandering for several days throughout the Upper Isonzo.

Between Sleme and the Isonzo, however, the Italian line was broken and the Austrians advanced shoulder to shoulder with the regiment of the Silesian 12th Division moving up the left bank of the river.

The advance of those troops towards Caporetto and the subsequent abandonment of the Saga defile by the Italian 50th Division greatly reduced the extent of the Monte Nero salient still in our hands during the afternoon of 24 October. The sole precarious communication remaining between these troops and the bulk of the Second Army ran across the bridge at Ternova.

On the southern face of the salient, Colonel Magliano, commander of V Alpini Group, animated the defence between Monte Nero and Pleka. Magliano remained upon Pleka with only the Monte Albergian Battalion, having been compelled to transfer the other two, Val Chisone and Belluno, to neighbouring units. He was in turn joined by XXX Battalion of the 9th Bersaglieri and remnants of other regiments.

Without news of what had occurred, on the evening of 24 October these surviving defenders saw fires surrounding them in every direction. Caporetto burned, Staroselo burned, and flames blazed along the Isonzo.

Cesco Tomaselli reconstructed the spectacle before their eyes:

> Night falls, one of those turbid and mournful nights in which even the air tastes of misfortune. When the snow stops and the sky opens, the defenders of Kozliak and Pleka realise only then that they are the final defenders of Monte Nero.
>
> Behind them everything blazes with fires. Below in the basin Dreženca burns, erupting showers of sparks and globes of reddish smoke; the reflection of the flames lights the mountain rocks. Upon the heights beyond the Isonzo, on the Kolovrat, at Luico and towards Matajur, rockets rise from time to time, followed by brief cro-cro-cro bursts of machine-gun fire.
>
> "Lieutenant, sir, what are we doing up here if our men are advancing backwards?"
>
> It is terrifying...

During the night the Austrians moved with no great force against this pocket of resistance. They fared badly, for an Alpini counter-attack recaptured the positions temporarily lost and took an entire company prisoner, including its commander.

The following day's operational order was found in the pockets of the adjutant, also captured. The attack would be renewed with three battalions.

Meanwhile a patrol sent to Dreženca to divisional headquarters returned. It had found only one corporal remaining faithfully at his post, who reported that divisional headquarters had departed at two o'clock the previous afternoon and had done so rather hurriedly.

The Austrians launched the decisive assault at about five in the afternoon on 25 October. Without any artillery support or supplies, with ammunition rapidly running out, those thousand Italians had only hours remaining.

Only one distant possibility of escape remained: attempt to filter in small groups through the meshes of the enemy encirclement and reach the Isonzo and Ternova bridge, the only bridge believed still to be in Italian hands.

It was a vain hope. At dawn on 26 October, a battalion of the 2nd Bersaglieri left to guard Ternova bridge was attacked by superior forces descending from the mountains, set fire to the footbridge and withdrew westwards to reach the rearguards of the 50th Division.

The survivors of the 46th and 43rd Divisions wandered like hungry wolves along the banks of the Isonzo until enemy patrols captured them one by one.

Colonel Magliano too ended in a prisoner-of-war camp. The small group with him was lying exhausted near Volnik when an enemy unit suddenly surrounded it and demanded surrender.

During the afternoon of 26 October 1917, with the final rifle shots, the last resistance by Italian troops entrenched in the Monte Nero salient died away. Most of the thirty thousand combatants holding it at dawn on Wednesday the 24th were prisoners by Friday evening.

His Excellency Alberto Cavaciocchi was certainly not lacking in military culture. A valued collaborator of the General Staff Historical Office, in 1910 he had maintained in a learned controversy with General Orero that Cialdini's retreat during the war of 1866 had caused the retreat of the Army of the Mincio and not the reverse, as his opponent claimed.

Precisely because every important battle from Marathon to his own day was present in his mind, Cavaciocchi did not imagine on waking at dawn on 24 October that within a few hours destiny and the descendants of Arminius, as he had once called the Germans, would reserve for him so massive a dose of bitter surprises, none of them catalogued and classified by the history of the past.

When the King arrived at Creda at about ten in the morning, there was still little to tell him except the violence of enemy pressure in the Plezzo sector and the consequent threat to Saga. The first reports concerning the enemy bombardment were not unfavourable, however, nor had the Italian artillery reaction appeared entirely inept.

Shortly after the King's departure it became known that the Germans had broken the front of the 19th Division at Volzana. Cavaciocchi had not excluded the possibility that, exploiting the dense fog, they might dare advance up the Isonzo.

It was true that the Napoli Brigade stood at Foni and, farther forward opposite Gabrie, a machine-gun company was present, as he believed. To be more certain, however, he wished to urge VII Corps to garrison properly the Army-line trenches from Luico to Idersko.

A telephone call from Colonel Boccacci to General Bongiovanni failed to produce the desired result. Bongiovanni, unwilling to take initiatives beyond his orders, refused the proposal.

A few minutes later, at 10:40, another alarm sounded: German units were approaching Kamno. This required the final reserves to be committed rapidly.

Three hours after the battle began, the 2nd and 9th Bersaglieri Regiments had been committed, assigned respectively to the 46th and 43rd Divisions, the latter together with the Belluno Alpini Battalion; the 280th Infantry was blocked at Saga; and the 281st and 282nd were now sent to defend the Army line near Ladra.

They could only hope in God that no further unpleasant surprise occurred before the Potenza Brigade arrived, reported to be seriously delayed.

An error had arisen on this point, the first of very many during that day. Colonel Boccacci believed he had understood from the aide-de-camp arriving ahead of it that the Potenza was moving up by the Brischis road. It was instead travelling along the Canebola mule track and was therefore closer than expected.

At 11:30 its commander, General Amantea, arrived and reported its position. Although Army headquarters had ordered the brigade to move on the morning of the 23rd, it had not left Faedis until seven in the evening. The 271st was almost at Creda, the 272nd was reaching Sedula, and only the 273rd, farther back, was expected at Bergogna in mid-afternoon.

The Potenza was nevertheless a mediocre reinforcement. Many soldiers were on leave and very many suffered from dysentery. It also possessed no machine guns, whether regimental or brigade weapons, forty-eight in all, because they had been loaded upon lorries and sent by another route. Its true strength therefore failed to reach three thousand men, further exhausted by the night's march.

Even this reinforcement was taken away. Boccacci made the mistake of telephoning General Egidi, Chief of Staff of the Second Army, to report that he intended to concentrate the Potenza at Staroselo. Egidi categorically ordered him not to count upon the Potenza, declared an Army reserve, and promised instead the timely arrival of the Massa Carrara Brigade, supposedly nearer but which no one had yet seen and would not see until the following day.

Another anxiety was added at 11:30. A lieutenant arrived breathless from Idersko, sent by the local garrison headquarters, to warn that many stragglers were pouring across the wooden bridge and dispersing into the rear.

The unfortunate man was immediately placed in command of these fugitives. He was to prevent their disappearance "energetically", applying the regulations issued for the purpose, and lead them instead to occupy the Army line between Idersko and Golobi.

While the situation around Kamno grew increasingly obscure, a telegram from Army headquarters arrived containing a brief and rather obvious summary of current tactical regulations:

> I recall that counter-offensive action, with attacks gripping the enemy in pincers, is the means of meeting the situation stop.
>
> General Capello

There was certainly no shortage of opportunities to "grip" the enemy. One golden opportunity might be seized by General Farisoglio and his 43rd Division, to which at two o'clock Boccacci telephoned the order:

> ... to proceed with the troops on Spika and the forces available farther north, according to the situation, in a vigorous attack from north to south to halt the enemy advancing from Kamno on the left bank of the Isonzo.

Farisoglio was having considerable difficulty containing the Austrian 55th Division on the arc of Monte Nero, against which he was attacking from south to north, exactly the reverse of what was now requested. He therefore thought he had misunderstood Boccacci's uncertain Italian and decided to travel to Army Corps headquarters for clarification, but at Caporetto fell into German hands.

Meanwhile IV Corps headquarters was drafting its one o'clock bulletin for Army headquarters. It mentioned the advance towards Saga, the forcing of Point 1270 as far as Planina Za Kraiu, which was untrue, and the enemy thrust towards Kamno, which had in fact already been taken.

> No news, Cavaciocchi added, of XXVII Army Corps.

There was no mention, because it was evidently still unknown, of the German march upon Idersko.

The bulletin was transmitted at 2:55, almost two hours late, when IV Corps had learned only minutes earlier that the Germans were marching upon Caporetto, whose loss was a matter of minutes.

Cavaciocchi had genuinely not expected this new and exceedingly dangerous threat. During the following hours he was compelled to drink a bitter cup. First the headquarters had to be moved, which with Germans liable to appear at Creda at any moment meant exceedingly rapid flight.

Several days later Bissolati told Malagodi that IV Corps headquarters had been surprised in bed and that Cavaciocchi "escaped in his underpants", an incredible claim given the hour and the activity. Events did not occur in precisely that way, but came close. The advancing enemy captured many confidential documents which there had been no time to destroy, including the literal translation of the operational order brought three days earlier by the deserter Lieutenant Maxim.

Cavaciocchi's first thought was to ask VII Corps for help. If Bongiovanni counter-attacked, perhaps all was not lost. Luico, where VII Corps troops stood, was only four kilometres from Idersko, and within an hour they could reach the Germans' rear. But for charity's sake, he must hurry.

Bongiovanni reasoned differently. First, the region between Zagradan Pass and the Isonzo was the "responsibility" of another Army Corps, which, not his own, had to counter-attack.

If he were required to organise a counter-attack, he would certainly not rush madly towards the Isonzo. He would first aim to recapture Plezia, which by then was already surrounded, then Foni, and finally the valley floor. In any case, General Bongiovanni possessed no troops immediately available to execute this methodical programme. This was a sufficiently valid reason to cut the Gordian knot and dismiss every other consideration as superfluous.

At 3:15, as hope of relying upon VII Corps vanished, General Montuori arrived at Creda and introduced himself as commander of the Second Army's left wing, an appointment given him at noon by General Capello.

On the way Montuori had met General Bruno alone.

- Which brigade do you command?
- The Alessandria Brigade.
- Where is it?
- Who knows? It has melted away, Bruno replied, spreading his arms.

At Creda the telephones had already been dismantled. Cavaciocchi and Boccacci wore terrifying expressions. Montuori had communications with Army headquarters restored and meanwhile asked why they were not arranging to bar the valley.

- Because we no longer have any soldiers.

- And the Potenza Brigade?
- But that is at the disposal of Army headquarters!
- To hell with that!

Seeing Cavaciocchi apathetic and stunned as though struck by immense disaster, Montuori personally arranged the Potenza Brigade's deployment: one regiment was to move to Stol, one advance towards the Staroselo defile and the third block the Boriana road.

He then accompanied Cavaciocchi to Bergogna, the new IV Corps headquarters, and left him at 3:40, recommending that he not insist upon defending Saga and withdraw into the Uccea valley if necessary. Cavaciocchi disagreed, but when he learned that General Arrighi had independently taken the same decision, he could not oppose it.

At six o'clock the Staroselo front collapsed, and four hours later Robic and Creda fell. Not long before, Army headquarters had circulated, for the information of every soldier, a telegram sent by General Cadorna to the commander of the Second Army announcing, in case he did not know it, that the great enemy offensive had begun.

The Supreme Command placed "certain reliance" upon the heroic spirit of commanders, officers and soldiers and expected, as customary, that they would know how "to conquer or die" in order to save the threatened Fatherland.

During the night, as the 271st marched towards the summit of Stol, a snowstorm broke and granted a pause to IV Corps troops and their commander. As the final sweet before sleep, he had learned of the premature destruction of the Caporetto bridge, whose inevitable consequence was the loss of many thousands of soldiers.

Early on 25 October further encouraging words came from General Capello.

> It has now been established, he said, that weak detachments penetrated our lines.

Officers and men were therefore recalled to a calmer view of events, a view by which "the conduct of everyone must be absolutely inspired".

Since the Austrians did not read Capello's proclamations, they sent against Monte Stol not a weak detachment but the entire 22nd Schützen Division.

Fierce fighting began and continued until late afternoon. It would have lasted longer had 50th Division headquarters not ordered evacuation of the summit, fearing envelopment on the left.

An unwritten rule of precious wisdom nevertheless prevailed in the Italian army: when an order arrives, wait for the counter-order. The counter-order arrived. Evacuation of Stol had been a complete misunderstanding and the troops must retrace their steps and retake the summit.

Crying "Savoy!", the Italian units counter-attacked with the bayonet from seven in the evening until well after midnight, suffering extremely heavy losses. The survivors finally had to withdraw defeated towards Bergogna.

These were the final actions witnessed by General Cavaciocchi. During the night before the 26th, while his soldiers attempted to recapture a mountain from which not the enemy but a foolish order had driven them only hours before, Cavaciocchi was sadly evacuating Bergogna, now too exposed, to withdraw towards Nimis.

General Asclepia Gandolfo, arriving from the Karst where he had commanded the 31st Division, presented himself and announced that he was Cavaciocchi's successor at the head of the almost non-existent IV Army Corps.

Before his dismissal became effective, meaning before he became inspector of military schools, Cavaciocchi was summoned to Udine for a final tête-à-tête with General Cadorna. He was reduced to a state of pitiable depression.

He nevertheless defended himself and proclaimed that his conscience was clear. The fault was not his but belonged to something mysterious and unforeseeable that had occurred along the front held by XXVII Army Corps.

The story was unclear and Cadorna did not believe him. He even joked with Father Semeria about Cavaciocchi: "Here is another man who says his conscience is clear." But Cadorna was wrong. Although not free of grave faults, Cavaciocchi did not bear the greatest responsibility for the Caporetto rout.

General Giovanni Villani, who had commanded the 19th Division since 12 August, possessed an austere spirit and was so rigidly attached to duty that he not only inspired respectful admiration in his men but transmitted to them a sense of the mournful inevitability of the events in which they were involved.

- On Monte Jeza, if necessary, we shall all die, he had said, with what pleasure among the members of the 19th Division is unknown.

To soften this openly proclaimed funeral intention, Villani went about explaining that the Austrians possessed insufficient rations and ragged, disordered uniforms and were reduced to the final extremity. Once a soldier dared interrupt him:

- Then why do they not make peace, General, sir?

Taken by surprise, General Villani hesitated long enough that sending the soldier before a military court would have appeared an act of ferocious revenge rather than punishment, and did nothing.

Within himself he was far less calm. To the parish priest of San Volfango, with whom he enjoyed friendly relations, he once said with a melancholy smile:

- They have sent me here to die!

The deployment imposed upon his division did not fully reassure him. He was especially distressed by the weakness of the left wing and insecure rear. Not all the Kolovrat chain, winding around the bend of the Isonzo with summits of little difference in height averaging about one thousand metres, was garrisoned. Wide gaps remained completely undefended.

Yet the position upon which the 19th Division was required to resist to the bitter end, Monte Jeza, was the pivot of the entire Italian defensive system. The three successive prepared lines converged near it: the forward line, the line of resistance to the bitter end, and the Army line. If Jeza were lost, a passage opened towards the valleys extending to Cividale and the plain.

The same reasons led the Austro-Germans to concentrate the greater part of their forces and artillery against the 19th Division. Guns in the Tolmino basin had multiplied until their density exceeded one piece for every five linear metres. Against Jeza, therefore, there was to be no agile thrust but a formidable blow from a club.

Throughout the night German artillery submerged the Kolovrat chain and the probable assembly areas of Italian reinforcements beneath fire of unprecedented violence. It assumed the character of true stupefaction, as though a sea of burning lava had poured across the summits.

The gas attack too was effective, though not in the catastrophic proportions seen in the Plezzo basin. The consequences of the final hour of bombardment, devoted to destructive softening, were exceptionally grave.

One after another the communications between the forward lines and headquarters, and between observation posts and batteries, disappeared. Worse still, communications were severed on a scale beyond every forecast of XXVII Army Corps headquarters, which had not expected so disastrous a collapse.

Even small tactical units were separated from neighbouring formations and, aided by the fog, kept ignorant of what occurred only a few hundred metres away. Under these conditions the numerous batteries of XXVII Corps, most of them projected far forward as though precise orders for their withdrawal had never been issued, stood in immediate danger of being overrun.

The artillerymen's training and preparation for infantry combat were inadequate. No battery had arranged close defence capable of resisting even a simple patrol that succeeded in infiltrating; or, where defences existed, ammunition was lacking. No escorts had been supplied for the special task of protecting the batteries against possible ambushes and attacks.

When the enemy fire ceased at about eight o'clock, it was easy to understand, simply by remembering what the higher commands had repeatedly said, that any future instant might bring the enemy infantry assault. The mortal silence of the Italian artillery was therefore astonishing and alarming.

An almost unanimous chorus of witnesses later testified to the artillery's complete inactivity on the 19th Division front. Colonel-Brigadier Gianninazzi, commander of the Spezia Brigade, wrote in his summary report on his brigade's fighting that even at noon there persisted:

> the absolute, solemn and impressive silence of our medium- and heavy-calibre artillery, an obstinate silence which no one could explain in any manner.

General Maggia, commanding the Napoli Brigade, had also observed the defence's abnormal conduct:

> ... the assistance of our artillery was extremely limited along the whole front, and it is my firm conviction that not a few batteries never entered action at all. I can state with certainty that at eleven o'clock the 61st and 63rd medium-calibre batteries under the Oliviero Group, positioned north of Case Ardielh, had not yet fired a single shot...

The Commission of Inquiry into Caporetto had indirect reasons for concealing this unflattering aspect of our response. It could not entirely hide it, although it sweetened the bitterness with benevolent words:

> The action of our artillery may in some cases have been late, just as it proved ineffective along most of the attacked front; but it cannot be said to have been entirely absent.

At the end of the bombardment General Villani moved to the divisional tactical headquarters at Albero Bello, so named after the only tree still surviving there after two and a half years of fighting.

He was deeply disappointed by the disruption of communications, which prevented him receiving information from subordinates or transmitting it to his superiors. The wireless station, which would have permitted both direct communication and communication with screened radio stations by using the Cividale station as a relay, had also been struck and irreparably damaged.

Without information, he did not dare move or issue orders committing the few divisional reserves: five battalions of the Napoli Brigade, fortunately at full strength, and the Val d'Adige Alpini Battalion.

He would need them if, as he feared, the enemy succeeded in enveloping his exceedingly weak left flank. Villani was one of the few who knew that the right bank of the Isonzo was entirely unguarded

because the Napoli Brigade, by a decision taken in agreement with General Badoglio's wishes, had been perched upon the mountains instead of placed on the valley floor to guard the access corridor to Caporetto.

Five battalions of the Taro Brigade, the 207th and 208th Infantry, five of the Spezia Brigade, the 125th and 126th, and three Alpini battalions of X Group held the 19th Division's forward lines.

They were attacked by a first wave of more than thirty battalions from the Alpenkorps, German 200th Division and Austro-Hungarian 1st Division, reinforced by a second substantial echelon and supported from farther back by the supporting German 26th and 5th Divisions.

By noon the reports reaching Villani through runners already offered a dark picture of the battle. Against the Raunza slope, Kamenca valley, Duole ridge and Duole valley the enemy pressed with great violence. The stubborn defence was already in difficulty.

At 12:10 the General ended his hesitation and committed the only reserve battalion immediately available to defence of Como Jeza, while the Val d'Adige was recalled from Kambresco and sent towards Jeza.

The principal threat, however, was not taking shape at the centre of his deployment. Although diluted along two kilometres as the crow flies, and many more following the ground, the bulk of the Taro Brigade held firm and checked the 4th Jäger Regiment throughout the day.

On the Cemponi ridge, Spezia units fought with alternating fortunes for many hours against the 3rd Jäger Regiment, which only at two in the afternoon succeeded in clinging to Albero Bello, thereby threatening the nearby Jeza summit upon which Villani had withdrawn. The 1st Jäger Regiment too was halted before Point 732 until 3:30.

The adversary achieved far greater success at the wings of the 19th Division. Alongside the 23rd Regiment of the Silesian 12th Division, the Württemberg battalion and the Bavarian regiment of the Alpenkorps advanced like a rake along the northern slopes of the Raunza ridge, which were almost as undefended as the right bank of the Isonzo.

They could therefore reach Monte Plezia at about one o'clock, leaving it isolated to fall the following day, capture Foni and turn left towards Zagradan Pass. At 4:30 Monte Piatto and Bukova Jeza, both unoccupied, fell into German hands, and the attackers prepared with great energy to scale the summit of Podlabuk.

On the southern wing, the Alpini of X Group, overwhelmed by superior forces, yielded Zible Vrh and Cukli Vrh and retained only Krad Vrh.

At about one o'clock, the 65th Division, fighting hard on the left bank of the Isonzo and greatly assisted by an observation post on Cukli under a very young officer cadet who had continued throughout the morning to supply precise information on enemy troop movements, was suddenly observed to fall silent. Shortly afterwards armed men, Austrians, were seen upon the slopes of Krad Vrh.

The 19th Division was therefore not being put out of action by the bold manoeuvres of elegant tactics. A primeval force appeared to crush it.

The Taro Brigade had repeatedly and anxiously requested barrage fire, but its urgent requests were not answered. The appearance of enemy detachments on the Kolovrat behind the brigade therefore induced Colonel Danioni to withdraw despite the success of his frontal defence.

During the early afternoon the Spezia Brigade likewise withdrew to the Vogrinski-Ostri Kras line, the ridge separating the Doblar valley from the Judrio valley.

All this information reached Villani with inevitable delays, frequently exceeding two hours, while lightning decisions within minutes would have been required to conduct effective counter-manoeuvres.

At 12:10 he judged the situation "rather serious", but only at four o'clock did he decide to employ the Napoli Brigade, diverting it "from its eastern tasks towards Zagradan Pass".

He informed XXVII Corps headquarters that he had considered it absolutely necessary to recall the available regiment at Case Ardielh to occupy the strongpoint of Bukova Jeza with one battalion and Natpriciar with two battalions.

General Villani grossly deceived himself about the timeliness of this manoeuvre, already overtaken by events. The Alpenkorps was taking Bukova Jeza and preparing to attack Jeza, now encircled on three sides.

The deserted summits suddenly filled with warriors outlined against the sky, whom the Italian units, already practically surrounded and condemned, watched with trembling anxiety.

Employment of the Napoli ended in complete disaster. Crying "Long live the 75th Infantry!", General Maggia led part of the brigade towards Casoni Solarie and Bukova Jeza, and the soldiers answered their commander's exhortations enthusiastically.

A first cold shower awaited them near Casoni Solarie. Two commanders of medium-calibre gun groups were descending from those mountain passes and told General Maggia that the positions and guns were already in enemy hands.

Shortly afterwards a battalion of the 76th Infantry was surrounded and captured. During subsequent skirmishes continuing throughout the night and part of the following day, the Napoli Brigade was mangled and compelled piece by piece to surrender.

More than four thousand men were thus lost inside the "Volzana trap". They would have been of decisive importance on the valley floor in halting Stein's relatively small columns.

At 5:30, closely threatened and still ignorant of the adverse fate then overtaking his divisional reserve, the Napoli Brigade, General Villani was compelled to abandon the summit of Jeza and chose Clabuzzaro, a village two kilometres to the west.

As he descended from the shattered summit with a group of officers, he suddenly changed his mind. His Chief of Staff was to go immediately to Clabuzzaro; he would first make a rapid inspection of Zagradan Pass to make certain that this exceedingly delicate point was properly held by the Napoli Brigade.

When he approached the pass with a few men, night had fallen, colours were turning grey and outlines were fading. It was therefore unsurprising to hear the characteristic metallic clicks of rifle bolts being placed in the firing position.

- Napoli! Do not fire. We are Italians. The divisional commander is here.

Unusually tall shadows appeared from the darkness and demanded surrender in German. Villani's companions barely dissuaded him from using his revolver. They all threw themselves down the slope, pursued by rifle fire disappearing into the night.

Germans at Zagradan Pass. When General Villani reached Clabuzzaro, he was physically exhausted and morally destroyed. His division had been reduced to thirteen hundred men, a skeleton.

Several thousand others still resisted among the mountains, certain that they would have to lay down their arms. Most were already dead or prisoners. This he knew, and this was stated by the reports his Chief of Staff had begun collecting. The 19th Division had practically vanished, swallowed by a monstrous force.

At eight o'clock he wrote General Badoglio a summary despatch on the day's events:

> After offering every possible resistance, at about 5 p.m. the troops of the 19th Division were overwhelmed along the entire front. The remnants of the Spezia Brigade with its commander, reduced to very small strength, are at Lombai. The remnants of the Taro Brigade are at Clabuzzaro with the undersigned. The artillery, for the most part dismantled and having lost almost all its personnel, is entirely destroyed.
>
> Immediately upon arriving at Clabuzzaro I established contact with and received orders from VII Corps, in whose support I now stand after recovering the remnants of the exceedingly exhausted troops.
>
> The circumstances of the enemy attack and the fog favouring it were extremely grave. Commanders and troops performed their duty to the last.

On the morning of the 25th General Villani gave everyone the impression of a man who had lost his balance. Sudden enthusiasm, renewed interest in recovering his men and a desire to improvise a new defensive line alternated with long intervals of gloomy silence, his mind absent and distracted.

Then once again:

- If the enemy descends upon Lombai, we shall attack at the head of the Val d'Adige Battalion.

The remnants of the Val d'Adige, almost entirely destroyed on Jeza, amounted to fifty men.

During the day the General moved from Clabuzzaro to Lombai. Everywhere the crowds of stragglers grew, organic bonds loosened, and as discipline disappeared, insolent words were heard:

- The war is over... We are going home... We are civilians.

Villani watched them apathetically and absently, or smiled with melancholy.

At dawn on the 26th he first wished to descend to Clodig, where his headquarters had been transferred, and then continue towards San Leonardo along the road to Cividale.

In a small hamlet he stopped to discuss with his staff the contents of the divisional stores, the deployment of the troops and the first measures to reconstruct the embryo of a front. He then apologised and said he had to leave for a moment.

The wait lengthened and the minutes passed without General Villani reappearing, while time and the enemy pressed on. A revolver shot was heard from the office of a nearby small hospital, into which the General had retired.

Those who first ran there found him still seated before the table, his arms hanging down and helmet askew. He had killed himself, unable to shake off the sense of anguish that had taken possession of him.

He had left his Chief of Staff a note whose spare brevity could not have confessed more clearly Villani's inability to survive:

> Dear De Medici,
>
> I leave it to you to continue the terrible task. I can bear no more.

General Villani.

Until evening Villani's body was not removed from the place of suicide. The funeral was conducted in the most summary form while the enemy announced his approaching arrival through the roar of shells.

The body was buried with understandable haste, and the location of the coffin was lost. Fourteen years later a peasant working his field struck a rough wooden coffin just beneath the surface. It contained the remains of General Giovanni Villani.

Military logic, at least during the second decade of the twentieth century, often differed from common sense until it appeared almost its opposite. To send an Alpini group as reinforcement to Dreženca, it would have been enough to take one from the general reserve without disturbing other units. But that would have been too simple.

Thus V Alpini Group under Colonel Magliano, selected for the task, left a gap on Krad Vrh that had to be filled. X Group was moved there from the Upper Bainsizza, and it in turn was replaced by the Roma Brigade.

Since these movements occurred one day before the offensive, three formations were tossed into unfamiliar areas to hold lines whose contours were unknown at the moment of danger.

Take X Alpini Group, composed of the Morbegno, Monte Berico, Vicenza and Val d'Adige Battalions. They had been told to hurry and build wire entanglements in the Velik Vrh area and fortify themselves because the enemy offensive was certain, as further papers specified, even giving its method and date.

"They shall not pass" was the watchword inspired by the wildest optimism. They would be unable to overcome the new trenches prepared and arranged by X Group.

When the Alpini had almost begun to believe it, the customary sudden orders overturned everything and hurled them from Velik Vrh to Krad Vrh, stretching them in a cordon from Scuole Rute to Cukli.

These were genuinely difficult positions astride the Doblar and Isonzo valleys. It was asking too much for three battalions, with one in reserve, deployed along three kilometres of front, to hold against the Austro-Hungarian 1st Division with eleven battalions, supported by the Prussian 5th with nine: the whole of Group Scotti.

Unaware that so many forces were preparing to attack his Alpini, Lieutenant Bini Cima, commanding a company of the Val d'Adige Battalion camped in reserve near Kambresco, could not escape a feeling of restrained emotion while waiting for the final hours of silence to pass:

> At midnight I wake. My Alpini sleep. It is now one o'clock. If the information is correct, the bombardment will begin in one hour.
>
> Rain, rain. One wishes it would rain harder.
>
> Furiously I smoke one cigarette, then another. I consult the watch with its luminous dial. Ten minutes remain. Now five, four, three, two. It is the hour. Silence. Only the more rapid dripping of water.
>
> A crash in the valley. The shell has passed over us. It is the signal. Alarm!...

After several rounds fell too short or too long, shells began striking the encampment and caused the first dead and wounded, about fifteen, while spreading the unpleasant perfume of gas.

At dawn the inferno ended, but an hour later the bombardment resumed more violently and dismantled one after another the few guns firing nearby. The damage caused was extremely grave, as were the losses from gas. On Krad Vrh, the Frankfurter Zeitung wrote on 6-10 December 1917, gas casualties were found in heaps.

When the Austrians attacked the Morbegno at eight o'clock, it resisted for three hours on Zible Vrh until the threat of envelopment forced it to withdraw at the centre and right, pivoting upon battalion headquarters.

Unfortunately the left company, exposed on its left flank after the resistance of Spezia units on the Cemponi ridge collapsed, was destroyed and its captain killed.

Infiltrating among the withdrawing troops, the Austrians isolated battalion headquarters. Seven officers, including the adjutant who relates these details, crouched in the trench hoping to pass unnoticed. They remained there until the following day, then attempted unsuccessfully to cross the fighting line, which had meanwhile moved forward.

The remnants of the Morbegno and Monte Berico withdrew into the Doblar valley. Only Krad Vrh held until evening, isolated through the efforts of the Vicenza Battalion, while the Austrians were already appearing to the north before Globocak and Ostri Kras and to the south before Auzza.

At eleven in the morning Bini Cima's company, together with the entire Val d'Adige Battalion, received orders to reach the 19th Division headquarters on the summit of Monte Jeza:

> We cross the road at Zagradan Pass and begin the climb.
>
> It is a storm of shells and shrapnel.
>
> We pass our own guns, some overturned and others abandoned in their positions, and meet no one during the ascent.
>
> Now the shells follow one another in great numbers...
>
> The climb is endless; it is death.
>
> I curse like a Turk and turn to make certain my Alpini are following. They are there, and they are few. I see them leap here and there, emerge from a heavy-shell crater, turn right and throw themselves down. There they are on their feet and running again.
>
> I call the nearest. Forward, forward. I gather them and lead them with me.
>
> There they are upon the summit. An instant of uncertainty. Six or seven shells arrive together, deafening and stunning us. The mule track we find runs level and twisting. Lorenzi tells me that only a few dozen metres separate us from the General. The road is a volcano without rest. Another shell goes mad. I see the cone of material thrown into the air, raise my hands and protect myself from the larger stones. Then forward again, bent double and running.
>
> There is the General [37]. A deity. Alone and upright upon the ruins, without trembling amid the destruction.
>
> Beside him two men dying from gas writhe in the spasms of agony.
>
> He fixes me with a steady eye and extends his hand:

"Well done."

"General, the 258th Company is at your orders."

"Good, well done, terrible. Occupy Albero Bello with your company. It possesses strong trenches, caves and the Army Corps observation post. Request ammunition, hand grenades and rockets from the Taro and Spezia Brigades, with which you will establish contact. I have confidence in you. Go."

Away at a run. I enter the communication trench but cannot continue. Everything has collapsed and the shells arrive without an instant's pause, precise and measured.

The brigades with which General Villani believed Bini Cima could establish contact had disappeared or withdrawn, a clear sign that Villani's information had not kept pace with events.

Only the three companies of the Val d'Adige now projected towards the enemy: the 258th at Albero Bello, the 256th between there and Jeza, and the 257th on the summit of Jeza.

Alarmed by the complete absence of lateral support, Bini Cima prepared with a heavy heart to spread his thin platoons around Albero Bello, an almost hopeless undertaking given the breadth of the line to be watched. The fog still remained, clearing only occasionally to reveal the landscape ahead, perhaps the height of Santa Lucia.

German units now appeared from every direction. Twice they reached the summit of the false Jeza, Albero Bello, and twice were driven back with the bayonet.

The position slowly became untenable, and by evening the company was compelled to withdraw to Jeza, where no one remained. There were no machine guns, no ammunition, no food and no water.

Since Monte Jeza's summit was surrounded on every side, Lieutenant Bini Cima attempted with a few Alpini to break the encirclement. Momentarily disordered, the Germans lost their bearings for just long enough to allow the detachment to vanish among the inaccessible cliffs.

About twenty Alpini and two officer cadets, nineteen-year-old boys, were forgotten at Point 929. Throughout the night, firing in bursts, they kept the Germans uncertain about the defenders' true numerical strength. When captured the following morning, they could boast that for several hours they had prevented forces many times superior from securing possession of the contested summit.

The remnants of the Val d'Adige Battalion divided along different routes. About fifty men with Major Michel, the battalion commander, who was not gravely wounded, reached Clabuzzaro and joined the remnants of the 19th Division.

Bini Cima instead withdrew towards Peternel and Clodig, reaching the area after both villages had already been occupied by the enemy. He then attempted with a few determined men to move northwards on an impossible march towards the Carnia sector, until, surrounded, he had to surrender and complete his fate in the prisoner-of-war camp at Celle, where other Italian officers, many not yet born in 1917, would be "accommodated" during the Second World War.

The Germans remembered the defence of Jeza, before which they had been checked for an entire day. "The Italians," the war diary of the German LI Army Corps, Group Berrer, records, "defended Jeza with extraordinary courage."

His compatriots were less generous with praise. Bini Cima writes:

The Commands and the commissions responsible for decorations did not know, and when they learned they did not believe it - neither the Commands nor the commissions had been with us.

After leaving Creda shortly after ten on 24 October, King Vittorio Emanuele travelled to Carraria to meet General Bongiovanni, commander of VII Army Corps, which in Capello's intentions was to "counter-attack offensively at the appropriate moment". Along the way the royal motor car had to cross areas swept by enemy artillery. When the King arrived at half past ten, he was astonished to find an atmosphere of placid tranquillity, as though that headquarters were not only far from the war but completely outside it, although the fighting lay two kilometres away.

He nevertheless asked Bongiovanni whether he possessed fresh information and, receiving a negative answer, requested that he telephone XXVII Army Corps. Contact was established at about eleven. General Badoglio confirmed that there had been artillery fire throughout the night and that he had no information because the telephones were broken, but it appeared that calm had returned upon his front.

Badoglio gave an entirely personal interpretation to the silence separating him from the forward lines, a silence perfected by the failure of the radio station. Inwardly he was nevertheless "concerned", and could hardly be otherwise because he bore responsibility for concentrating everything in "the manoeuvring action of the commander", as his biographer puts it, convinced that from his tactical headquarters at Cosi he could efficiently control by remote command the most "profitable" fire. That locality was approximately as far from the Artillery Command, from which Badoglio had reserved to himself the personal privilege of ordering fire opened, as it was from the Austrians.

At about nine, after several hours of useless waiting - only one runner had arrived, and he came from the 65th Division, a relatively peripheral sector - Badoglio sent Major Freguglia to reconnoitre towards the 19th Division headquarters and Major Cantatore towards Ostri Kras. Cantatore was not, as one might have supposed, carrying the order to open fire. His task was still a delaying one: to "make contact", "restore some telephone communication" and "send information as soon as possible".

The road between Cosi and Ostri Kras was short, three kilometres, but exposed and heavily shelled. Major Cantatore reached Ostri Kras only at one o'clock. There he met Colonel Cannoniere, who pointed out the first Austrian patrols appearing upon the edge of Krad Vrh. Since no one remained between them and the Austrians, they had no choice but to evacuate rapidly unless they wished to risk capture.

A little after two, at Srednje on his return journey, Cantatore met Badoglio, who was himself attempting, somewhat late, to reach Ostri Kras and make contact with the Artillery Command.

Consumed by impatience, Badoglio had done what an army-corps commander should never have done in those circumstances. After remaining motionless at Cosi during the first hours, he began wandering and made himself impossible to find precisely when information was likely to arrive.

The conversation with Cantatore, wounded and distraught, convinced Badoglio that reinforcements must urgently be requested from the Second Army. Before entering hospital, Major Cantatore was to carry a personal message from the commander of XXVII Army Corps to General Capello. Meanwhile Badoglio ordered the Puglie Brigade, the 71st and 72nd Infantry Regiments and his only reserve, to deploy as a precaution astride the Judrio valley.

Since attempting to reach Ostri Kras had become dangerous, Badoglio decided to move to Cave Kambresco, although it was not easy to reach. He was forced to make a long circuit, reach the Klinak mills, descend farther into the valley and finally climb to Kambresco, where he appeared at four in the afternoon by way of mountain paths.

His subordinates meanwhile bombarded him with messages that remained unanswered. General Villani had sent two at noon reporting the enemy advance towards Globocak and Jeza. They were received at 3:25 p.m., but Badoglio could not learn of them because he could not be found.

At that time the 65th Division, deployed beyond the Isonzo, also made itself heard:

> Please send information by radio through Cividale, with which this headquarters is connected by radio.

Five minutes later:

> No means of communication with that [XXVII Army Corps] headquarters. Urgent need to know situation, especially that of 19th Division.

At four o'clock Badoglio was finally able to transmit the first reliable information from Cave Kambresco to the Second Army. It was unpleasant information, since by his own confession he knew nothing of the 19th Division or of his other forces on the left bank of the Isonzo. He reported the enemy advance upon Vogrinski, stated that he had deployed the Puglie Brigade and concluded: "I have no possibility of communicating with anyone."

At the same time Badoglio ordered the 19th Division, whose condition he knew nothing about, to collect between Podlabuk, Jeza and Ostri Kras. He sent Lieutenant Maffiotto by motorcycle to General Bongiovanni to urge him to cooperate in the defence of Jeza.

These orders had no practical value. A third and far more serious order, carried by Major Freguglia, would have had consequences. General Fiorone, commander of the 64th Division, was entrusted with the three XXVII Corps divisions on the left bank of the Isonzo - the 65th, 22nd and 64th - and ordered to transfer them to the right bank to hold Cicer Vrh and protect the Isonzo bridges at Valle Doblar.

Badoglio apparently gave no thought to XXIV Army Corps, whose right wing would have been left hanging in the air. Army headquarters intervened, suspended the order and transferred the three divisions to General Caviglia.

Still from Cave Kambresco, at 6:20 p.m. Badoglio sent a new message to the Second Army:

> Situation on the right bank of the Isonzo. Jesenjak-Cemponi ridge lost. It appears to me that General Villani holds Jeza and intends to move through Ostri Kras as far as Pusno. For my part I have deployed the reserve brigade with one regiment astride the Judrio between Hum and Pusno and the other in the Globocak trenches between Pusno and Kambresco. I have sent orders to General Coffaro and General Fiorone by different routes to block the Isonzo valley by occupying the Sobinsk-Na Raunich line. I await reinforcements so that I may check the enemy advance, especially as I have no support from field artillery. I require these reinforcements to secure the Sobinsk spur, towards which troops from the left bank of the Isonzo are also moving. I remain at Cave Kambresco.

General Capello comments that Badoglio plainly did not understand the true gravity of the situation. Kambresco too, where he risked capture by an enemy patrol, was not a safe place. He therefore moved back another six kilometres south-west to Liga.

These further movements made locating the General still more difficult. The Second Army could not find him although many bundles of telephone lines remained in operation, and neither could two men desperately searching for him.

One was Colonel Cannoniere, half of whose artillery had already been swallowed and the remainder was about to follow. He moved first to Cosi, then Kambresco, and reached Liga only at midnight. The other was Major Campello, instructed by the commander of the Second Army to determine the exact location of XXVII Army Corps headquarters.

Leaving at eight in the evening, Campello reached the Klinak mills at ten, was sent on to Kambresco and there learned that he would find the man he sought at Liga. At about midnight he was therefore able

to transmit to Badoglio an order from Capello concerning employment of the 5th Bersaglieri Brigade, according to the wishes voiced by Major Cantatore.

Another Bersaglieri brigade, the 1st, which together with the 5th formed the 47th Division, had been granted by Capello at 7:25 p.m.:

> I place at the disposal of that headquarters the 1st Bersaglieri Brigade, which has been ordered to move from the Judrio valley to Kambresco.

These reinforcements were to support the Puglie Brigade as it deployed upon Globocak, where it immediately tasted the attackers' bite. Between seven and ten in the evening, two Puglie battalions were routed near Pusno and compelled to withdraw upon Globocak, abandoning a fine portion of the Army line.

Badoglio told Major Campello, for transmission to Army headquarters, which had already received advance warning by telephone, that the partial collapse of the Puglie resulted from desertion by the troops he had personally deployed, who had abandoned the positions without fighting.

General Capello writes that this information:

> later had to be denied. The greater part of that brigade resisted for a considerable time on the Globocak line and did not deserve the atrocious insult which its army-corps commander had lightly cast upon it.

Badoglio was not the only commander on that unhappy day to throw responsibility for events upon the combatants. Few commanders not directly involved in the fighting remained innocent of the fault. A position fell? The soldiers' fault. A regiment broke? Cowards, every man. Even when the facts showed otherwise, accusations of cowardice, "weakness" or "poor fighting spirit" were implied between the lines if not openly proclaimed.

Captain Sforza, Supreme Command liaison officer with XXVII Army Corps, summarised the events of 24 October with the meanness sometimes displayed by those who command. He wrote that:

> the troops of the 65th Division had offered "some resistance" - although in reality they had fought hard and maintained every position;
>
> the Alpini defending Krad Vrh had partly broken in disorder towards the rear and partly surrendered to the enemy - although General Villani had written with his own hand the despatch ending with the literal words: "The commanders and troops did their duty to the last";
>
> the 19th Division "is distinguished by greater firmness during the day".

During the night another telegram from Badoglio made Second Army headquarters start:

> 25 October 1917, 2:50 a.m.
>
> Puglie Brigade headquarters has informed me that remnants of the Alpini are on Cicer Vrh and that it has arranged for the remnants of the 71st to resist along the slopes of Globocak, seeking contact with the 72nd holding the Judrio valley barrier. I have ordered General Boriani to go immediately to Kambresco and see whether it is possible to attempt the immediate recapture of Globocak with the 21st Bersaglieri Regiment. I shall then arrange for it to be supported by other Bersaglieri regiments.

Globocak too had therefore fallen. The highly disagreeable news rebounded from Cividale to Udine, filling everyone with consternation. If Globocak had fallen, the Austrians might appear on Korada within a few hours: the lightning encirclement of the Second and Third Armies.

The report was false. A correction, obscurely worded, came shortly afterwards from Badoglio himself:

> An officer from my headquarters sent to the spot confirms that the whole Globocak massif as far as Srednje is in our hands and that contact between Srednje and Hum has also been established...

The relief was brief - Globocak fell at four in the afternoon on 25 October - but gaining fifteen hours in a desperate situation where minutes mattered was not without consequence. The divisions withdrawing from the upper Bainsizza were partly able to save themselves.

A halo of legend soon gathered around this "incident". On 26 October Luigi Barzini transmitted to the Corriere della Sera:

> ... An Austrian corps emerging from the fortifications of the Santa Lucia bridgehead crossed the gorge unnoticed and occupied the opposing forward positions on the Cemponi ridge. From there it sprang forward to the summit of Globocak, which had been left undefended and upon whose slopes we possessed artillery positions. But the heroic 5th Bersaglieri Brigade counter-attacked a few hours later, recaptured the mountain, took prisoners and machine guns upon the summit, recovered the guns and swept the enemy from the slopes to the outermost spurs.

The fighting for Globocak was conducted by an XXVII Army Corps bearing no resemblance to the formation attacked on the morning of 24 October. The three divisions on the left bank of the Isonzo had been handed to General Caviglia, while the remnants of the 19th Division had been attached to VII Army Corps.

The artillery of Colonel Cannoniere could be entrusted to no one except the enemy. Of the seven hundred guns making up his establishment on the morning of 24 October, only one anti-aircraft battery remained to him at nightfall.

After losing more than two thousand men on San Gabriele, the Arno Brigade had been assigned to the 3rd Division of VII Army Corps and deployed on the eve of Caporetto beneath the southern slopes of the Kolovrat.

Every day Lieutenant Sironi drilled his company, training it to move rapidly up and down a staircase built along the flanks of Monte Piatto. The other companies of the 213th Infantry amused themselves in the same way along different routes. A thousand-metre staircase was no joke, but the satisfaction of resting after the climb was absent, because after reaching the summit there was only time to descend again in utter exhaustion.

During these exercises Sironi and his men observed completion of the latest positions for heavy artillery: long 149s and 210-millimetre mortars. Beside the gun muzzles the ammunition stacks grew more imposing day by day. The movement of men and matériel was continuous along the beautiful military road of the Kolovrat.

But what of the offensive? Although the Arno officers had been told nothing, this movement of troops, lorries and artillery gave them cause for thought. The absence of our aviation was no good omen either. It had been driven away by an enemy air force plainly reinforced and now releasing its Fokkers to fly within a few metres of the batteries, observing and reporting.

Reserve food and barbed wire, requested long before, arrived only on 23 October. The coils were large and had to be unrolled and rewound onto more manageable reels. Barrels were available for the water which, according to orders, had to be placed near the summit positions. But who was to bring the water? No one appeared to have considered it.

Nor did anyone show concern when, on the evening of 23 October, the enemy operational plan was read to everyone, announcing that offensive action would begin within a few hours. It appeared that the offensive concerned the inhabitants of another planet. Capello's peremptory commands that the men

should be made fully aware of the impending threat were plainly not taken very seriously. Far from integrating, the Army's intentions and regimental intentions ran along two skew trajectories.

Faithful to this distorted view of events, the battalion commander calmly ordered the customary climbing and descending exercise to begin at one o'clock. Someone pointed out that they might be caught in the open by the enemy bombardment, expected to begin at two. Perhaps the programme should be brought forward.

- Very well, then. Midnight.

Sleepy but in good spirits, the men began the ascent in complete darkness. They climbed, slipping continually in the oily mud, and eventually reached the summit.

> My men crouch against the walls of the spacious cave. I go outside to see whether there are any stragglers. From the cave entrance, far below, one can see the line of fire on the Bainsizza, but in the deep silence nothing can be heard.
>
> I am about to go back inside. It is two o'clock.
>
> A crash. A shell explodes four paces away. A gust of wind and nothing more. But it was the signal. A storm of fire of every calibre falls around us. It seems that hell has broken loose outside the cave.
>
> A shout: "Masks!"
>
> All my soldiers possess one except a single man. I slap him and teach him to urinate upon his handkerchief and hold it over his mouth and nose.
>
> ... Fortunately it is raining and the gases have no effect. They disperse or sink lower.
>
> Not one square metre is spared by the enemy. He knows that our best artillery is positioned here.
>
> The hours pass. At six there is a brief pause, then hell begins again more monstrously. The shells are no longer filled with asphyxiating gas. They fall one after another. The cave trembles and appears about to split open. The telephones scarcely function. The gunners possess precise orders but fear making mistakes. They wish to ask, to know.
>
> At eight there is a pause. What has happened?
>
> The enemy infantry has gone over to the attack.
>
> ... Outside the fog grows thinner and withdraws lower and lower into the valley floor. Our artillery is still firing furiously - always upon Mrzli.
>
> At about seven Captain Sacchi indulged a whim. Lacking orders, he fired upon Tolmino.
>
> "After all," he told me, "no one will ever know."
>
> At 8:25 I receive a message: "The night exercise is over. The Regiment is to return to camp."
>
> I remain perplexed and obey. On the motor road I meet Lieutenant Pompizii and Major Nicoletti. We ask one another the reason for the order. Perhaps the offensive before us has failed, or perhaps they are sending us elsewhere, to the Bainsizza.

The descent resumed and the men returned to camp. The mountain summits from which the Italian counter-offensive should have been unleashed remained deserted and without infantry. The artillery stayed behind, because it could not be moved.

Around noon two, ten and then a hundred men appeared shouting along the Casoni Solarie road. Soldiers and officers, junior and senior ranks, were mixed together, arriving on foot and in lorries. They shouted, "The Austrians! The Austrians!" and carried breechblocks in their hands. Anyone attempting to stop them was swept away as though by runaway horses.

They were the gunners from Bukova Jeza. The vision dissolved before the astonished and terrified soldiers of the Arno.

At one in the afternoon the enemy bombardment resumed with extreme violence and increased the uncertainty. The 213th Regiment received orders to put into practice, seriously this time, the exercise in which it specialised: the ascent of Monte Piatto. And quickly, please, if they wished to arrive before the Germans, who had slept by night and marched by day, whereas our men had marched by night and were resting beneath the mountain slopes during the day.

Because of relentless German artillery fire, the ascent took much longer than usual. Only at seven, as the fog lifted slightly, was the customary position reached.

It was deserted and silent. Guns lay abandoned, with firing tables and diagrams on the work benches. Nothing could be understood except that the enemy had plainly passed through.

German patrols appeared and disappeared. They were all around and saw and knew everything like the Red Indians of the Rocky Mountains. Bewilderment grew as night approached. Sections of trench held by our men alternated with other empty sections. Who were those platoons winding in good order towards Monte Piatto from the Isonzo valley? Friends or enemies?

- Who goes there?

No one answered. An invisible patrol moving closer heard them speaking German. The column deployed calmly and methodically along the ridge. Dozens of white rockets rose towards the sky.

> ... We are surrounded. We look at one another in terror.
>
> Oseo says to me, with a sob in his voice:
>
> "Not Mauthausen, Lieutenant, sir!"
>
> What can be done? I lose myself in the problem.
>
> But what has happened? How can the Austrians already be here?
>
> And why is the line empty?
>
> ... It is midnight and the deepest silence falls all around. This oppressive and sinister silence lasts four hours.
>
> Suddenly behind us comes a characteristic tapping: machine guns. The sentries jump inside. The enemy is firing upon our rear.
>
> ... The enemy occupies this curious position. He penetrates like a wedge into our lines and, spreading behind us, threatens our first line. But he is in turn contained and halted by our regimental reserves.

The whole task is to prevent our encirclement.

Good news: at six the Firenze Brigade will attack Monte Piatto. We are to cooperate in driving the enemy away.

Six o'clock arrives and nothing appears.

At about seven in the morning a group of brave young men has had enough. Encouraged by Officer Cadet Pugliesi, they shoulder their rifles and rush to the attack:

"We are men! Forward! Savoy!"

Sironi followed them with some of his own men, but the attempt ended badly. German machine guns croaked from every side. Those who succeeded returned to the trench. Officer Cadet Pugliesi lay on his back, staring at the sky for eternity with open eyes.

Suddenly salvation seemed to appear from the reverse slope. Our men were attacking. It was the Firenze Brigade climbing the steep hillside to the assault.

Before Sironi's eyes unfolded an incredible tragedy, demonstrating that when matters go badly they can always become worse. On reaching the Clabuzzaro crossroads the Firenze took the wrong direction. Instead of attacking Monte Piatto, which was still weakly defended, it was launched by a headquarters in a trance against Podlabuk, where the Germans were established in strength and where no Italian forces were available to assist.

The mountain ridge was embroidered with black flowers from the shells, which opened broad circles in the ranks of the 127th and 128th Infantry Regiments. Platoons broke apart and re-formed beneath the fire and continued with indomitable courage. Immediately beneath the summit, however, numerous machine guns swept them with deadly bursts and thinned ranks already sparse. The remnants of those courageous boys disappeared into the valley, carrying with them the final memory of Kuk and Kobilek.

At that moment one of our field batteries awakened on the right and, for reasons unknown, sent a salvo directly upon our trench. We escaped by a pure miracle.

Desperate anguish gradually took possession of us. The circle was tightening and we were now units immobilised and unused. The enemy was already behind us. He must have broken through at Casoni Solarie and descended the Podlabuk ridges. The road towards Clodig and Cividale lay open.

Several runners were sent to find regimental headquarters, but none returned. Even had one returned, he would have brought melancholy news, for the entire regimental headquarters had already been captured. Other German units meanwhile climbed the Nachnoi ridge after driving back the 214th Infantry and descended from it, spreading to right and left and enveloping both the Italians on Monte Piatto and those on Matajur.

It was three in the afternoon. Only one order had been given to those abandoned companies: remain where they were, do not move and do not withdraw. Lieutenant Sironi proposed breaking the encirclement through the small opening that still remained. His company commander refused. Better prisoners than fugitives. That was what two years of trench warfare had taught him.

There came a moment of silence, broken by a cry resembling the ill-omened call of an owl:

- Heraus!

Angry rifle and machine-gun fire answered. Everything became quiet again.

- Heraus!

At 3:15 p.m. movement began along the line. About one hundred men of III Battalion emerged from the trench with their weapons raised. Sironi's men looked at him doubtfully and hesitated. Rifle fire resumed and ceased after ten minutes. The men abandoned their rifles and moved away.

- Madmen, what are you doing?

- What else remains, Lieutenant, sir?

Guido Sironi was alone with his orderly, a Socialist trade-union organiser and courageous soldier. Beneath them an Italian machine gun still disordered and mowed down the Germans. But they advanced and continued advancing. It was the end.

On leaving the trench the two men found themselves before a group of German mountain troops with machine guns aimed at them: tall, fair-haired and well-fed young men. If Germany suffered hunger, she spared her soldiers. Every squad leader carried around his neck a section of a topographical map and an electric torch. They seized, disarmed and searched the prisoners.

- Nicht weiss Brot?

Then began the melancholy walk. At Monte Plezia several hundred other prisoners waited, formed in ranks of five with the officers at the head. They were all marched towards the Isonzo. They crossed the enormous and intact wire entanglements of the Volzana plain and then passed over a footbridge towards Tolmino.

An Italian aircraft suddenly appeared in the sky, but two black-crossed hawks waited in ambush, fell upon it and shot it down. The son of Deputy Ciuffelli, Minister of Public Works in the Salandra Cabinet which had declared war, died in the flames.

In the evening they reached the area around Santa Lucia station. They had crossed the first Austrian rear areas, where a crowd of ragged territorial troops jeered and beat them.

- Italien kaputt! Cadorna kaputt!

Then came the long journey towards the prisoner-of-war camps of Austria and Germany. And the spirit of the soldiers?

> ... So long as the soldiers remained in the hands of their officers, so long as surrender was not inevitable and panic had not overcome them, they fought calmly and went without hesitation into the assault and to death.
>
> But afterwards.
>
> Afterwards, when the disciplinary bond was broken and the nightmare of imminent death had vanished or nearly vanished, man's primitive instincts regained control.
>
> In those simple souls, still unaware of the terrible disaster, there suddenly exploded the wholly animal joy of not being dead, of being outside danger and of having finished the war. At that moment, and only at that moment - let Cadorna know it, let the journalists remember it, those who were not there and afterwards shouted of the cowardice of units taken prisoner as though in a great ambush arranged by fate - the soldiers first appeared indifferent, then not displeased and finally positively happy with their lot.
>
> At that moment, and only then, the subtle poisonous defeatist propaganda and the justified exhaustion caused by a bloody, apparently fruitless and badly conducted war surfaced together and bore fruit.

> For it should be noted that at that same moment everyone, officers and soldiers alike, asked how and why the disaster had occurred: the reasons for the lightning and unopposed German irruption, the absence of orders, and the silence and disintegration of the artillery and headquarters.
>
> Everyone thought and shouted that the commanders had betrayed them: irrefutable proof that the soldier knew he bore no responsibility for the defeat and was a victim of the errors and faults of others.

In Italy it was insinuated during those days that the Arno Brigade had surrendered without fighting. Giving evidence before the Commission of Inquiry, General Bongiovanni declared:

> The Arno Brigade, or more precisely its left wing [the 213th Infantry], did not, in truth, behave particularly well on that occasion, because it offered little resistance and remained passive before a clearly defined enemy attack.

While Lieutenant Sironi fared badly, Officer Cadet Troiani, at the opposite end of the same 213th Infantry Regiment, fared no better.

Felice Troiani, who eleven years later would enjoy a moment of fame when he took part in the polar expedition of the airship Italia and crashed with Umberto Nobile north of the Spitsbergen islands, was at that time an officer cadet of the 1897 class, with one month's seniority and eight days at the front.

The Royal Army was so short of officer cadres, however, that an entire company had been entrusted to so young a man. General Rosso, commander of the Arno Brigade, had taken a liking to the very young cadet and dragged him along to conferences where he distilled and commented upon superior orders for his officers.

The value of the explanations was diminished by the shortage of topographical maps. The only copies were possessed by the General and a major favoured in his capacity as the General's former schoolmate.

Every day Troiani and his colleagues received instructions concerning the trench sectors they were to defend and map. Every day the sectors were changed and the work began again. When, after repeated moves, he had more or less surveyed the entire front assigned to the 213th Infantry, yet another counter-order placed his battalion in reserve at Ravne.

Sheltered beneath Monte Cucco, scarcely anyone noticed the enemy bombardment preceding the Caporetto offensive. During the afternoon of 24 October the reserve companies were nevertheless recalled one by one to the line. A headquarters officer accompanied Troiani and his men to a trench on the flank of Cucco facing the Isonzo, pointed to the river and ordered them not to move and to repel every attack. A magnificent position and an exceedingly easy mission.

For many hours nothing happened. Suddenly a small-calibre gun registered precisely upon the trench and a machine gun began firing laterally. Calm returned and silence formed again. Not moving was all very well, but something had to be learned. Troiani left the trench and found himself surrounded by a group of German soldiers commanded by an officer:

> They wear enormous helmets, high, squat and heavy, with two strange little horns projecting from them. They give me the impression of being invulnerable, as though a bullet would merely dent the helmet and a grenade would feel like a gentle slap.
>
> I am stupefied with astonishment because what I see is so unexpected that it appears a nightmare, a bad dream.
>
> The officer, young and distinguished, salutes, introduces himself and says:

"Nichts zu machen, alles kaputt. Wir haben schon Cividale besetzt" [38]...

> My former soldiers emerged one by one from the trench hole like cockroaches. It pains me to say so, but they were happy. They believed themselves out of danger and celebrated the Germans, who treated them coldly. Several of the most enthusiastic tried to kiss the hands of their captors.
>
> I felt my heart disintegrating. I still had my revolver and placed a hand upon it, but I saw Marta and lacked the courage to leave her. I unfastened the belt, handed the weapon to my victor and resigned myself to fate. My war was over. It had lasted twenty-two days and I had not fired a shot.

The fates of Sironi and Troiani provide two examples of how the energies of many VII Army Corps formations were dispersed between the evening of the 24th and dawn on the 26th.

Born badly, VII Army Corps grew worse. It had originally consisted of the 3rd Division, the Napoli Brigade and the 2nd and 9th Bersaglieri Regiments. All these were improvised forces: the Napoli came from XXVII Corps, the 2nd and 9th Bersaglieri from IV Corps, while the 3rd Division, after fighting on the Bainsizza, had scraped together brigades already severely tried by recent battles - the Firenze, Arno and Elba.

At the last moment the Napoli and the two Bersaglieri regiments were returned to their original corps and replaced by the 62nd Division. The latter came from Trentino and, during the week before the Caporetto offensive, had been assigned in succession to every army in the Italian force.

The 62nd Division, consisting of the Salerno Brigade - another veteran of the Karst - and the 4th Bersaglieri Brigade, received orders to leave Trentino only on the 22nd. It arrived at Cividale on the 23rd in trains following one another continuously throughout the day.

On the 24th, while IV Corps and the 19th Division fought furiously and were already in grave difficulty, the 62nd Division was still deploying, while the 3rd continued repairing the Army-line works assigned to it.

General Viganò writes:

> As soon as those infantrymen reached the ridges, they began working to repair certain old trenches ruined through abandonment. They had been built two years earlier and were covered works with few narrow openings on the reverse slope, loopholes mostly blocked by landslides, and no shelters for the supporting troops or ammunition dumps. It need hardly be said that very little was achieved in this hurried work of restoring those traps. These repairs represented the whole activity of the 3rd Division during the day.

Only on the evening of the 24th could the deployment of VII Army Corps be regarded as complete: the Elba Brigade west of Jeza, where one of its battalions was already clashing with the German 200th Division; the Arno behind the Kolovrat; the Firenze in reserve at Drenchia; the 4th Bersaglieri around Luico; and the Salerno on Matajur.

There were thirty battalions in all. On paper they counted for much, but in reality for much less, because the attackers had already put out of action most of the forces which VII Corps was supposed to reinforce.

Bad news, each report more disagreeable than the one before, had pursued General Bongiovanni since morning. The Germans have broken through at Volzana. The Germans are at Idersko. Counter-attack. Counter-attack was easily said. With his troops only half deployed, and considering that the enemy attack was for the moment developing in territory "belonging to another army corps", Bongiovanni did not know what to do and allowed himself to be surprised.

At 3:30 p.m. two battalions of the Silesian 12th Division climbed rapidly and boldly from the floor of the Isonzo valley to the Kolovrat slopes and established themselves at Golobi, where they captured much artillery, almost beneath the noses of the 4th Bersaglieri Brigade camped a few hundred metres away.

On the evening of the 24th, although Bongiovanni did not know it, his corps was the only organically intact formation on the Upper Isonzo front, and it was already beginning to be badly mauled.

The passive and inactive conduct of VII Corps irritated Capello. Yet part of the fault, though not the responsibility, necessarily belonged to the commander of the Second Army, who failed to keep his subordinates informed promptly of developments. At 6:05 p.m. he was still urging Bongiovanni to counter-attack towards the Isonzo valley floor because "the enemy [was] very close to Caporetto", although Caporetto had been occupied four hours earlier.

Only much later did Bongiovanni begin to awaken. At 10:30 p.m. he informed Cividale:

> The 62nd Division reports at 10 p.m. that it will immediately begin an operation intended to recapture Golobi, north of Luico, and the eleven 105-millimetre guns abandoned there today, and then proceed counter-offensively towards the Isonzo valley floor stop. Salerno Brigade, holding Monte Matajur in strength, will support the movement stop. Information from that division concerning its connection on the left is uncertain stop. Please provide information concerning the 53rd Division for the indispensable purpose of connection.

The language was highly bureaucratic. Bongiovanni's exhortation telegraphed to his divisional commanders at 8:25 the following morning was equally bureaucratic:

> ... The troops are to be persuaded that the enemy columns are merely weak detachments and recalled to an exact evaluation of events...

Deep in trouble, Bongiovanni had copied, according to the widespread custom, the telephone message issued twenty-five minutes earlier by Army headquarters:

> It is now established that the detachments which have succeeded in entering our lines are weak forces. Officers and troops are immediately to be recalled to a calm view of events and to a correct evaluation of their strength, which must enable us not merely to resist but everywhere to throw the enemy back. The conduct of all must be inspired absolutely by this conception.

During the 25th the Austro-German "weak detachments" disposed of the remnants of the Napoli, destroyed the Elba and Arno Brigades in exceedingly bitter fighting, and threw the Firenze from Podlabuk after it had counter-attacked in the belief that it was climbing Monte Piatto.

The 4th Bersaglieri Brigade, gathered around Luico, fought around Golobi during the night of the 24th, and the position was recaptured by the Italians the following morning. When the Germans returned in strength, however, the brigade, now separated from the Arno and IV Army Corps, had to withdraw quickly towards Cepletischis, leaving several hundred dead upon the field and several thousand prisoners in enemy hands.

Of the entire VII Army Corps, on the evening of the 25th only the six battalions of the Salerno Brigade remained more or less intact.

Barely seventy-two hours earlier the Salerno had been torn from the temporary quiet of Bassano and transported by railway to Cividale, from where it continued by lorry as far as Savogna, arriving on the evening of the 23rd. Beyond Savogna it was impossible to continue by motor transport because of road congestion, so Luico was reached late at night after a ten-kilometre march.

The whole of the 24th was wasted in a slow, difficult and exhausting approach to Matajur. When the Salerno was finally in position, holding the crest line and the seven-hundred-metre contour, the Germans were already beneath it.

During 25 October the Salerno remained isolated, because Luico had been abandoned by the Bersaglieri, who withdrew to Cepletischis, while IV Corps retreated farther and farther into the Natisone valley.

Matajur had not been prepared for defence. There were no trenches or wire, and the access road suitable for heavy traffic had not yet been completed. This did not prevent artillery columns from being sent along it. At a certain point they could neither advance nor withdraw and lay idle waiting to be captured by the Germans.

The latter lost no time. Advancing behind Matajur, Lieutenant Rommel spread disorganisation and panic through the rear services and captured fifteen hundred prisoners, increasing the confusion.

On the morning of the 26th General Zoppi, commander of the brigade, was summoned to VII Corps headquarters to assume command of the 62nd Division, whose divisional commander had been seriously wounded. When he reached Carraria, however, no one remembered why he had been summoned.

Meanwhile a lieutenant of carabinieri had been sent to the new Salerno commander, Colonel Antonicelli, formerly commander of the 89th Infantry, with a written order to withdraw from Matajur, which had become untenable. Through a banal copying error the order required the retreat to take place on the morning of the 27th rather than the 26th.

Although the lieutenant swore repeatedly that this was an oversight and that withdrawal must begin immediately, Antonicelli refused to argue with a written order and sent the messenger back to obtain more precise instructions. Before the process could be repeated, the Salerno, completely surrounded, capitulated.

General Zoppi comments upon the end of the Salerno Brigade:

> To expect soldiers in such circumstances to practise strategy and grand tactics may be a fine dream for anyone who has never experienced the mental torment of being unable to know. To expect a soldier who has been outflanked and surprised, and is therefore defeated before fighting, to reverse through courage a situation inexorably compromised is madness.

The Commission of Inquiry nevertheless judged the Salerno's conduct, as usual, "passive", since the brigade had done nothing to remain informed or to disturb "the easy spreading of the enemy into the basin below Creda and Caporetto". The Salerno nevertheless fought hard. Alongside 3,800 prisoners, the official history of the Italian brigades records 1,400 dead and wounded.

During the morning of the 26th all the surrounded units on Matajur, except about one thousand men, surrendered and began the road to captivity.

Forty-eight hours had been sufficient for nothing but the name of VII Army Corps to survive.

On 17 October an exceptional flood caused the Isonzo to overflow, increasing the current's speed so greatly that the bridge at Siroka Nijva was swept away and hurled violently against the bridges at Auzza. The second of those bridges, fortunately made of steel, held although severely damaged and prevented the disaster spreading farther downstream, perhaps indefinitely.

Direct communication between the two portions into which the Isonzo divided XXVII Army Corps nevertheless remained practically interrupted, and while the river was in flood every repair was impossible.

This natural calamity placed another obstacle before defence of the Isonzo defile between its right bank and Cukli Vrh. The position was extremely weak and lacked lateral support, being entrusted to one machine-gun company and two platoons of the 274th Infantry of the Belluno Brigade.

South of Selo, therefore, the Italian defence along the Isonzo offered the same dangers as the Volzana trap. It was exceedingly fortunate for the Second Army that the Austro-Germans did not plan to repeat towards Auzza and Canale, using Group Scotti, the manoeuvre that the Silesian 12th Division was preparing towards Caporetto, and that after battle began they failed to recognise the opportunity.

Against the right of the Italian XXVII Corps and the left of XXIV Corps, the Austrians had prepared the intervention of three divisions forming the right wing of the Second Isonzo Army.

Throughout 24 October the 65th, 22nd and 64th Divisions of XXVII Corps defended themselves stubbornly, capturing about one thousand prisoners and recapturing the few trenches lost initially. Only one battalion, isolated on Point 549, capitulated after many hours of fierce resistance, watched with satisfaction by General Coffaro, commander of the 65th Division.

At the end of a reasonably successful day, the only dark point was the complete isolation of the three divisions. What the soldiers could see from the Lom heights did nothing to inspire confidence. Every communication with the 19th Division had fallen silent and Austrian formations were appearing upon Krad Vrh.

General Caviglia, commander of XXIV Corps, had also been occupied from early morning organising resistance against the enemy attack, which had succeeded in taking several unimportant fragments of trench. General Capello, immediately informed by telephone of the "reverse", appeared to attach no importance to it, contrary to his customary desire for an immediate counter-attack. This was a clear sign that other and more serious concerns oppressed him.

At 10:30 Capello telephoned Caviglia and, before the other man could speak, told him that the enemy had broken through at Volzana and that he should therefore be careful. He then hung up. Caviglia hurried to question Badoglio:

- What is happening on your side?
- Matters are going badly. I shall now try to remedy them.

These were perhaps the final words Badoglio spoke into the telephone at Cosi. Silence then descended upon him.

For XXIV Corps the day passed in successful counter-attacks, which gave the Austrians the impression that nothing less than Capello's proposed counter-offensive had begun. Yet successful resistance on the forward positions only worsened the general condition of the divisions deployed on the Bainsizza, because while they held, the enemy advanced on their left and threatened their lines of retreat.

It was therefore logical that at ten in the evening Caviglia should receive from the Second Army an order to withdraw to Line D, the defence-to-the-bitter-end line. It was grave and illogical, however, that the three divisions of XXVII Corps had been more or less forgotten.

Only after several hours of difficult and slow telephone conversations with General Egidi and the divisional commanders could Caviglia set the retreat in motion, leading his own formations - the 49th, 68th and 10th Divisions - and the orphaned divisions of XXVII Corps, a total of sixty-four infantry battalions with their artillery and services.

The movement, begun late and without simultaneity, was conducted as best it could be. Caviglia writes:

> Because the troops in the line did not withdraw simultaneously, the Austrians infiltrated between the various columns and reached Line D before the left-hand divisions. They were able to climb unobserved into the Verco basin and forced us to hasten our withdrawal from Oscedrik, Fratta and Semmer.

Among the formations placed in difficulty for these reasons was the Roma Brigade, the 79th and 80th Infantry Regiments. At noon on the 25th Caviglia learned that it had surrendered to the enemy:

> At that moment the commander of XXIV Corps [39] committed the psychological error of transmitting to Second Army headquarters the same report exactly as he had received it. He failed to foresee the use the superior commands would make of it. His Chief of Staff sensed the danger, but Second Army headquarters nevertheless had to be informed of news demonstrating the gravity of the situation in the Avscek valley on that morning of the 25th.

It was "an extremely bad error", the XXIV Corps commander admitted, which seriously damaged the brigade's fine reputation. Caviglia added that he "then felt, and still feels today [in 1933], burning remorse".

In reality the Roma Brigade fought hard and courageously until it was almost destroyed. Three of its six battalion commanders fell on the field, and when it withdrew from Canale it had been reduced to three hundred men.

The order to withdraw behind the right bank of the Isonzo reached Caviglia at three in the afternoon on 25 October. II Army Corps was to withdraw with him onto Vodice.

At that moment there was still hope of holding the Globocak-Liga-Korada-Plava-Palievo line and of leaving VI Corps, deployed around Gorizia, in place, especially since the enemy did not appear to be pressing in a direction parallel to the course of the Middle Isonzo but was plainly seeking a broad envelopment towards the upper Tagliamento.

This manoeuvre resulted from a discussion - not to call it a quarrel - within the enemy command between those who intended to direct the principal operation westward through the high ground and those who wished to march south along the Natisone and Judrio valleys, exploiting an opportunity that had arisen unexpectedly although it was not included in the original battle plan.

But because every High Command, General Caviglia observes, possessed the same defects of slow and limited sensitivity in a more or less aggravated form, the opportunity opened to the Austro-German Fourteenth Army to move south and cut off the entire Second Army, and perhaps the Third as well, through an exceedingly rapid march was lost.

By pursuing the mirage of a wide envelopment, the enemy permitted the Italian army's retreat behind the Tagliamento, ordered by the Supreme Command during the night before the 27th, to be carried out with some success despite indescribable confusion. In victory the Austro-Germans committed enough mistakes not to win completely.

On 17 October Lieutenant Ardengo Soffici began the propaganda tour assigned to him by General Capello: visit reserve formations, deliver suitable addresses, and carefully observe and report upon the troops' "moral consistency" and the effects of defeatist propaganda.

Soffici's experience on that occasion was deeply disturbing, because it demonstrated that the most effective defeatist propaganda was conducted by the national Government, the Supreme Command, Second Army headquarters and, successively down the hierarchy, everyone possessing lawful power of command over other men.

The spectacle offered by the 79th Infantry of the Vicenza Brigade, camped at Ipplis, was impressive:

> The rain had stopped and we therefore descended on foot along the same terrible paths, now transformed into ditches of mud. On either side, in the terraced fields, I saw rows of tents pitched along the vines and many soldiers moving idly and sullenly among them, sinking their feet painfully into yellow slime, a broth which continual movement made ever more liquid and abundant.
>
> From time to time sentries soaked with damp presented arms as we passed, while sergeants, corporals and clerks on camp duty saluted sadly, standing beside sinister little shelters of planks, branches and rags that trembled and dripped in the wind.

Conditions were no better with the 278th Infantry: tired, depressed and unhealthy men, poorly fed and exposed to the weather. Badly clothed and worse shod, they too still lived beneath canvas:

> There is also a disease circulating throughout the brigade. A disease called amoeba, it seems, a kind of exceedingly serious contagious dysentery. In isolation camps, in mud and damp, hundreds of soldiers languish abandoned, while the doctors do not succeed in visiting and treating them all.
>
> Finally, another grave question concerns certain "elements" brought into the companies and harmful in the extreme. They are deserters conditionally pardoned and convicts assigned to the formations, where they bring the example of indiscipline, crime and anarchy.

This was the material and moral treatment reserved for supporting formations. The Vicenza Brigade was an Army reserve and should have been relied upon for defence and counter-attack if the enemy succeeded in breaking through.

When Soffici returned to Cormons on 21 October he briefly reported to General Egidi, Chief of Staff of the Second Army, the miseries he had witnessed, without concealing the terrible spectacle of the unfortunate men in the Ipplis camp splashing like ducks through infected mud.

The Chief of Staff showed visible irritation: "We have issued a thousand orders on the subject." Then:

- Accommodation... What can be done about accommodation? The peasants' houses contain the harvest. There is no room. There is no room.

Finally came the customary conclusion: "Give me a written report." General Egidi was distracted by much more serious troubles: the offensive, the transfer of headquarters to Cividale and the bombardment of Cormons.

For several days the enemy had amused itself by bringing Cormons under fire from several heavy guns said to be positioned behind San Daniele, twenty kilometres away. Lieutenant Colonel Boccaccini, exceedingly pale, explained the reason for the mysterious fire to the uninitiated:

- There is no doubt. They have fired upon the four sides of the town and registered upon headquarters. Tomorrow it will be our turn.

General Egidi, by contrast, was possessed by nervous cheerfulness:

- For several reasons I am delighted that they are attacking us.

He was not referring to the bombardment of Cormons but to the great offensive.

In any event, an air of evacuation prevailed in Cormons. On 22 October only a few men remained at mess to make the customary forecasts regarding the enemy attack: optimistic predictions and words, but cracked by an undertone of uneasiness.

Maestro Toscanini, as usual at home at Second Army headquarters, became irritated by fears he considered gratuitous and unjustified. Yet he too was uneasy.

On the following day at Cividale, the atmosphere of moving headquarters eclipsed the enemy offensive for several hours. The whirlwind of incoming and outgoing despatches then restored the tone: "By order of the Supreme Command...", "The Massa Carrara Brigade...", "Who is available for the cipher office?" Egidi and his deputy moved in and out of offices, dictated short orders, read messages just received and glanced at those only half deciphered.

There was no sign of Capello, although he was said to be present. Officers with high braid streamed up and down the stairs. Outside came the popping of engines and the roar of lorries, whose continual passage made the walls vibrate.

During the night it became known that the enemy attack had begun at two, exactly as expected, between Plezzo and Tolmino. Nothing remained except to wait for further developments.

The hopes of the previous day appeared confirmed by the earliest communications. The bombardment was heavy but not terrible; now there was a pause; the bombardment had resumed; it had stopped again. Capello says that the tone of the answers to Army headquarters' questions "continued for a long time to express calm and confidence".

When the first telephone messages later reported the result of the infantry clash, however, the surprise was complete and painful. The enemy was advancing everywhere; the enemy threatened Saga; the Germans were marching upon Caporetto.

Soffici, Lorenzoni and the others in the cipher office stared at one another and consulted the large topographical maps in dismay. Pale, drawn faces began appearing, while the continual departure of runners was a symptom of growing agitation. Someone murmured: "What a disaster, what a disaster."

The transformation of the atmosphere was not instantaneous. During the morning Army headquarters had received information not from subordinate commands but from artillery observers. As the Germans advanced, that source disappeared and a blanket of silence descended over the Upper Isonzo front.

Capello sensed that something was going wrong and at noon took his first precautionary measures: he sent the Vicenza Brigade to Stupizza, the narrow point of the Natisone valley, and created a Wing Command grouping IV, VII and XXVII Army Corps under General Montuori.

He then travelled to Udine to confer with Cadorna. He arrived in poor condition, purple-faced and feverish. The exertions of the previous two days had again reduced him severely. Cadorna came to meet him and felt his pulse, which was running at one hundred and thirty beats a minute.

Whether because of his serious physical condition or for some other reason, General Capello gave Colonel Gabba, Cadorna's secretary, the impression of being completely out of phase. General Porro helped him sketch the various defensive lines because Capello could not manage alone.

Yet he still insisted upon his counter-offensive idea "to throw the enemy six kilometres beyond the present lines", so little was he convinced that he faced a disaster of the first magnitude. Leaving for Cividale towards evening, he therefore left the Supreme Command with the calm impression that events were developing almost normally. It was expected that IV Corps should creak - it was the Health Corps, after all - but nothing irreparable had yet occurred.

At Cividale, however, Capello found that the picture had worsened into something grave and dramatic: Caporetto lost, Saga abandoned, no news of the 19th Division, and Badoglio demanding reinforcements - "he too!"

Instead of becoming more numerous, reports grew scarcer. It was as though entire divisions, surrounded and cut off by the enemy's lightning advance, were swallowed by darkness:

> Our men still resist upon the mountains. But the reports grow rarer. We live as though inside darkness filled with threats.
>
> There is hope of strong resistance at the Saga defile.
>
> Someone says, however, that it has already been forced.
>
> What is happening? It can no longer be understood... And that silence above...
>
> Faces exhausted, eyes clouded by the effort over the ciphers, we stare as though stunned at the people continuing to come and go.

The only men preserving good humour at Cividale were Alpini of VII Corps passing towards the front. The officers had filled the Albergo del Friuli with their substantial bodies and cheerful shouting:

- No fear, fair-haired beauty. We shall stop the Germans.

Together with the Alpini, though coming from the opposite direction, the first gaunt and terror-stricken advance parties of stragglers from the Upper Isonzo reached Cividale:

> Going home for a moment while a fine rain fell, I found the dark little street filled with soldiers crowded around the door of the Staging Command. A grey crowd, soaked with water, silent and lamenting, whose purpose there I did not at first understand. They were all unarmed and resembled beggars waiting for alms in the sinister light of the Command's red lamp. Perhaps soldiers from some depot waiting to be sent forward?
>
> Only while climbing the stairs did I suddenly understand, and my heart tightened with bitterness. They were stragglers...

The measures Capello took that evening and during the night began to correspond to the gravity of the moment. While General Cadorna prescribed in a letter issued at eleven the successive defensive lines upon which the Second Army should resist, Capello diverted VII Alpini Group towards Monte Maggiore, the connecting hinge with the Carnia sector; ordered XXX Army Corps, placed at his disposal by the Supreme Command, to concentrate around Nimis; directed the Ferrara, Avellino, Messina and Jonio Brigades to approach the exits of the valleys; and ordered the two corps on the Bainsizza, XXIV and II, immediately to withdraw to the defence-to-the-bitter-end line.

Reading these provisions in orderly sequence may give a false impression of the state of mind in which such decisions were made and received by the formations concerned. The order addressed to the Jonio Brigade, for example, read:

> Before dawn that brigade is to advance to Torreano and send troops to occupy the Monte Madlessena ridge, establishing contact at San Quirino with the Ferrara Brigade on Monte Purgessimo. The barriers across the floor of the Natisone and Cosizza valleys before Azzida will be formed by that brigade. Give assurance.

After drafting the text and having Capello sign it, General Egidi looked around for a trusted courier and saw Soffici, who had happened to pass through headquarters before going to bed. Seizing him took a second. He was to go to Galliano, or somewhere near it, where the Jonio Brigade was located, and deliver the message to its commander.

It was not easy to find the Jonio in the deep night. After locating a line of vehicles beyond Rualis, Soffici questioned the drivers, Sicilian soldiers brutalised by cold and sleep and incapable of uttering two syllables. With difficulty, from several dialect expressions, he guessed that they belonged to the Jonio.

Fortunately an orderly appeared and relieved his embarrassment by immediately accompanying him to General Magliano. Soffici knocked gently. A hoarse and sleepy voice answered:

- Who is it?
- Forgive me, General, sir. I am an officer from headquarters and have an order for you.
- Come in.

The General opened the letter and read:

- Holy Christ! Torreano, by two o'clock. What time is it?
- After midnight [40].
- How many kilometres are there? Let us look at the map. Four to Cividale and four from Cividale to Torreano: eight kilometres in all. It is impossible. It will take two hours merely to assemble the men.

While dressing rapidly, General Magliano questioned Soffici:

- What is happening? Tell me. What are they saying at headquarters? Can they be stopped? Devil! Devil!

The camp meanwhile had been roused. Officers and soldiers stared savagely at the bearer of misfortune. At last the brigade set out, and the General climbed into Soffici's car, which was returning to Army headquarters:

> During the drive through the damp darkness we scarcely spoke. I watched the poor old man beside me, completely wrapped in his blanket and cape, and thought that he was probably wondering anxiously what might happen to him and his six thousand men within a few hours...

Capello's night was no less tormented:

> I was seized by vomiting, cramps and horrible spasms of headache, yet found the strength to issue orders to the troops. At one point the doctor told me that a catastrophe might occur at any moment and that he could not answer for my life.
>
> I replied: "It matters little whether I end through a convulsion or a bullet."
>
> A little later he returned and said that I might not remain master of my actions. I then summoned my Chief of Staff, wishing him before anyone else to judge the acts I was committing.

During the morning Colonel Doctor Morino, impressed by Capello's suffering appearance, succeeded in persuading him, for his own good and that of the Second Army, to relinquish command.

Capello nevertheless tried to conceal his condition from outsiders through a casual manner. When Ardengo Soffici met him around noon and asked how he felt, he replied that he was well, then added:

- It is the left wing of my Army that is ill.

It was plain, however, that he too was exceedingly ill: pale, with lifeless eyes in an earthy face, he dragged himself painfully.

Inside and outside headquarters at Cividale, anxiety and distress continued growing. Soffici relates:

> At headquarters I found the courtyard filled with vehicles, the entrance hall and corridor packed with senior officers I had never seen, and with officers from the line - most of them artillerymen - wearing their battle helmets, wet and bewildered, who had come to ask questions and explain.
>
> The heads of offices, General Egidi and Colonel Balsamo, hurry through the crowd, livid and angry. One can no longer speak to anyone; no one looks another in the face. Even one's colleagues are unapproachable.

Nevertheless, a proclamation from the military authorities pasted upon house walls and portico columns invited the population to remain calm because "no enemy threat hangs over it".

Headquarters itself was preparing to evacuate after nightfall and transfer to Udine. Lorries continually sounded their horns at the gate as they manoeuvred in and out.

The commander of XXX Army Corps arrived at Cividale during the afternoon with ominous news. His two divisions were still marching and would not be available before 27 October. As for two others recalled by the Supreme Command from Trentino, they could not be counted upon before the 28th, while three more requested from the Third Army remained motionless on the Karst.

The available reserves would be exhausted long before these reinforcements could arrive, and no possibility existed of filling the forty-eight-hour gap. In Capello's words:

> A livid atmosphere of tragedy, filled with anguish, mystery and fatality, suddenly descended upon the surroundings. Everything lived an unreal life of nightmare which suppressed every positive faculty of reasoning and action. One breathed threat, danger and catastrophe in the air, as though the thunder of the enemy guns had pronounced the irrevocable decree of a destiny that does not forgive.
>
> The sensation of finality gripped every heart like a vice and cut the nerves of every impulse, even a desperate impulse to react. Every face was destroyed, and many - too many - souls had lost all faith in themselves, in the Army and in the destinies of the Fatherland.
>
> Here and there, like a flame, rose the undefeated and still proud spirit of some formation or commander, but the flame burned alone in a desert of ashes.

Was this, then, the end?

It was not the end, Capello concluded, provided a drastic and painful remedy was immediately adopted: an instant retreat placing space and time between the pursuing enemy and the Italian forces. Withdrawal at least as far as the Torre and afterwards to the Tagliamento. Cividale, Udine, eastern Friuli and Carnia would have to be abandoned. So be it.

Capello wished to remain alone for a moment and concentrated within himself. After re-examining the situation and making his decision, he was carried with considerable difficulty to Udine, where he arrived at three for a final decisive conversation with General Cadorna.

The latest reserves placed in motion, he explained - the two divisions recalled from Trentino and the three from the Third Army - were unnecessary. The Second Army had not yet exhausted its own reserves, for it possessed four uncommitted divisions, and could release others from II, VI and VIII Army Corps, which were under only the weakest enemy pressure.

It was therefore not reserves that were lacking, but the possibility of employing them in time where they were needed. This was the principal reason compelling retreat. The roads were also blocked by the wave of stragglers and refugees, making movement in the opposite direction almost impossible for forces that should have been sent to contain the enemy along the mountain line.

Capello also expressed serious reservations regarding the conduct of the fighting troops:

> Although many formations did their duty well, many others did not, either offering no resistance at all or resisting in a derisory manner.

Finally he asked to be relieved of command for health reasons, but not before signing every provision concerning the retreat so as not to leave his successor with so grave a responsibility.

General Cadorna, who independently was already inclined to regard timely withdrawal as the only effective remedy, accepted Capello's conception and agreed with him upon the manner of the retreat to the Tagliamento.

Returning to Cividale, Capello made final contact with his staff. The decision, made in the hope of restoring freedom of initiative to the Italian army, acted as a stimulant. Hope returned that the game was not lost, that bad fortune could be reversed and the Italian will again imposed upon the victorious enemy.

The Second Army would retreat to the Monte Maggiore-Monte Cavallo-Monte Korada line, halt at the Torre, along which six fresh divisions would be deployed, and finally withdraw in order behind the Tagliamento. Retreat to the Tagliamento would not end the contest.

The desire for counter-offensive action resurfaced in Capello:

> We shall halt on the Tagliamento-Fella line. They attacked me with their right wing; I shall counter-attack their right.

At about six a circular telephone message informed commanders in the field that General Capello was definitively transferring command of the Second Army to General Montuori.

After the war there was much gossip about Capello's illness, whose seriousness some doubted. How little he desired to abandon command is nevertheless shown by his conduct during the following hours. After entering a motor car, he fell into a lethargic sleep from which he awoke several hours later, suddenly feeling better.

At six in the morning he summoned the duty medical officer at the Verona military hospital and dictated a telegram to General Cadorna stating that he felt capable of resuming his post.

Cadorna, although solicitous and exceedingly kind to the last, did not feel able to mishandle the unfortunate Second Army further under such difficult circumstances. Several days later he wrote that he appreciated the offer but was compelled to reject it:

> A further change in command of the Second Army today would be harmful. The need for General Montuori to possess all the authority and prestige required has led me to give him effective command of the Army. This does not signify diminished confidence in Your Excellency or a less equitable recognition of what you accomplished as commander of the Second Army.

On 29 October Capello answered with thanks. He understood the reasons that had led General Cadorna to give Montuori effective command of the Army, but hoped rapidly to "accumulate the energy I shall have to spend for the Fatherland".

General Capello's story was over. Before Luigi Capello died, fate would reserve for him the danger of the conspirator and the striped jacket of a life prisoner.

At half past seven on Wednesday evening, 24 October, Colonel Angelo Gatti, who held the unofficial position of historian to the Supreme Command, was dining with several acquaintances and discussing the bulletin issued a few hours earlier by the Command itself:

> The adversary, with strong assistance from German troops and matériel, has concentrated numerous forces upon our front for offensive purposes. The enemy blow finds us firm and well prepared...

Gatti disagreed with the boastful tone, for that was what the unfortunate phrase represented until proved by events. It was better, he said, to sell the bear's skin after killing it.

Fortunately the weather was so atrocious that a serious attack had little chance of gathering momentum. He went to the cinema.

Those days did not mark the first official report of German troops upon our front. The bulletin of 23 October itself had supplied newspaper headlines: “AUSTRO-GERMAN UNITS THROWN BACK WITH HEAVY LOSSES”.

The reference was to a thrust made by a pair of battalions around Lake Misurina, a “feeling-out operation”, Guelfo Civinini had written in the Corriere della Sera, which had served to show the Germans “how hard the Italians are, as hard as their rocks”.

During the afternoon of the 24th, Colonel Gatti had perceived a calm and relaxed atmosphere at the Supreme Command. The enemy offensive was noticeable only from the gunfire which had produced an irritating noise for several hours and from the flashes visible in the distance.

For the population of Udine, by contrast, the night of 23-24 October had been one of terror. At dusk came a dark, closed and terrifying sky and a cold, cutting wind; then the rumble of the guns, at first mistaken for a continuous passage of lorries, but becoming so rapid, dense and imposing that it could no longer be misunderstood.

The nightmare continued during the following morning, when the city was invaded by alarming reports brought no one knew by whom, reports which alone failed to touch the Supreme Command.

Cadorna was still possessed by a fundamental doubt: whether the operation on the Upper Isonzo was the genuine offensive, or instead a feint while the true objectives were the Karst and the Bainsizza. As a precaution, in a letter to the French and British Chiefs of Staff, he informed them that the offensive just begun “will have to develop along the entire front from Plezzo to the sea”, with the principal effort between Plezzo and Tolmino. At a quarter past noon he promised the Duke of Aosta artillery reinforcements, to be taken from the Second Army, in case the principal attack broke out against him.

At about five, speaking at headquarters with Colonel Gabba, Cadorna's secretary, Gatti learned that information was still scarce. The Germans were attacking: that was the novelty. But were they really there? Gabba had been forced to put them into the situation report because too many sources reported them; yet he did not believe the enemy plan was truly the one under discussion.

There were the Romanian officers, admittedly; the Czech; ninety-six German batteries in the Tolmino plain. But it was incredible that they should possess so ambitious a strategic design. The “tactical” difficulty of breaking through the three successive and formidable defensive lines, almost three enormous and insurmountable stairways, “killed” the strategic calculation - unless the Germans, the “masters” of war, had also become braggarts.

Shortly afterwards Gatti met Cadorna himself, still divided between belief and disbelief. How could the enemy hope to pass unharmed beneath the fire of our artillery? Strategically it would indeed be advantageous. During peacetime manoeuvres the Caporetto area had always been regarded as the ideal point at which to break through the Italian frontier defences, but in practice “tactics destroy strategy”. Cadorna had repeated that maxim for some time and appeared greatly pleased by it, encouraged by the echo from his advisers.

Colonel Gatti added that the consequences of the German presence must be explained very clearly to the soldiers, so that they would not believe they merely faced the customary opponents in different uniforms. There was a great difference between German and Austrian methods of fighting.

For example, the French officer attached to the Situation Office had told him that German artillery employed counter-battery fire on a very large scale, unlike the Austrians. The temptation to move the guns continually so that they would not become targets was consequently strong; but guns in movement were guns that did not fire. French gunners therefore received orders to die beside their pieces rather than attempt to move them.

Surrounded by his entourage, Cadorna listened attentively. The observation struck him: “A circular will have to be issued.”

Gatti then went to dinner. At Cadorna's urging he had recently written, under the pseudonym Probo, a laudatory article for the Nuova Antologia concerning Cadorna's war plan at the moment of Italian intervention, and expected its publication from one day to the next.

The article spoke of that distant “marvellous beginning”, now bringing forth “its first fruits”, and of the cyclone which from 24 May 1915 onward, “for two or three days”, had uprooted and twisted the Austrian defence, “like those cyclones that rush unhindered from the horizon and fill the sky with screams and fury”. It had not been a fortunate idea to exhume the modest advance of “radiant May” and see its glories published - by coincidence - in so sinister a moment.

When the cinema performance ended, Colonel Gatti was returning home when he saw lights in the entrance hall of the headquarters building. More from curiosity than anything else, he went inside. Everyone was there: Porro, Gabba, Pintor, Cavallero, Gallarati Scotti and the others - but not General Cadorna.

Gatti asked how matters were going.

- Badly, Gabba replied. Twenty thousand prisoners, perhaps, and every gun lost.

Gatti stared in amazement at those drawn faces. It was monstrous and inconceivable. It was equally inconceivable that, before withdrawing to think, the Chief had already mentioned the possible retreat of the whole army behind the Tagliamento. Could two years of desperate sacrifice dissolve into nothingness? The two hundred thousand dead of the Karst, Sabotino, Monte Santo and the Bainsizza?

It appeared impossible, but it was true. There was no time left to teach through circulars how the Germans fought. The scale of the defeat was emerging in all its gravity.

Someone spoke of an Italian Sedan, a Sedan so unexpected that on the previous evening General Porro had travelled calmly to Verona to close the course for staff officers which had just ended, returning only on the morning of the 24th.

The principal occupation of the Supreme Command during that feverish night was issuing a flood of instructions intended to scrape together from the four points of the compass the reserve troops indispensable for plugging the widening breach. Not every office perceived with equal promptness how sudden the reversal had been. General Caviglia writes:

> This state of mind - failure to adapt to circumstances - continued until late evening in several peaceful offices morally distant from the war, although geographically too close to the forward lines.
>
> At 9:15 p.m. a bureaucratic general order was sent to every army, urging them to resist along the entire front as though the enemy operation were about to begin. Almost simultaneously another office ordered the troops on the Bainsizza to withdraw to the line of defence to the bitter end...

Cadorna himself based his suddenly pessimistic judgement upon a picture rosier than the truth, because it had been constructed from information already overtaken by time. At 11:40 p.m. General Porro informed the Ministry of War that the offensive was in full progress, specifying that the enemy had

succeeded in advancing towards Saga, had reached the Isonzo valley floor at Idersko and occupied the Krad Vrh ridge - a picture already far behind events.

Despite this imperfect knowledge, and despite orders sent to Capello at nine instructing the Second Army to defend itself by withdrawing through three successive lines, the last running from Korada to Monte Maggiore - in any event the pivot of the manoeuvre and the connecting link with XII Carnia Corps - General Cadorna was already issuing instructions to restore the Tagliamento defensive line and immediately caused retreat orders to be prepared for circulation if necessary.

The night, which ordinarily brings counsel, brought instead the worst reports. Men such as Colonel Gatti who had gone to sleep hoping to awaken in the morning with the feeling that they had merely experienced a bad dream received confirmation that reality exceeded their worst fears.

At half past eight General Cadorna, having accompanied the Duke of Aosta from his office - the Duke received that morning instructions to organise a retreat to the Tagliamento if necessary - noticed Gatti and called him over, almost confiding in him:

> At first sight this disaster may appear like the one in Trentino. It is not. This is much more serious. The sign of the Trentino disaster was that an uncontrollable panic seized the troops during the first days. The scarcity of troops in the front line, bad command and so forth had produced it. But it was panic, after only one year of war, and it could be remedied because the body was sound.
>
> The sign of this disaster is exhaustion. The army, poisoned by propaganda from within, against which I have always struggled in vain, is broken in spirit. Anything rather than fight. This is the terrible aspect of the situation.
>
> We have lost Globocak. Who can say they will not reach Korada today? If they reach Korada, the troops I possess on the left bank of the Isonzo, on the Bainsizza plateau, will be cut off. During the night I have thought of what I must do.
>
> My deployment will therefore be as follows: from the north, Stol, Mia, Matajur, San Martino, Monte Hum, Kambresco, Ronzina, Fratta, Semmer, Monte Kuk, Vodice, Monte Santo, the Gorizia bridgehead and the Vallone.
>
> This is only for the first moment. In the second I wish to be on the right bank of the Isonzo, at Korada, Planina and Sabotinoli.

Cadorna's tormenting thought was therefore to disengage from the enemy. Whether his diagnosis of the causes of the rout was correct or not, the prescribed treatment was the right one and coincided with what General Capello was preparing to propose.

While Cadorna spoke with Gatti, Colonel Gabba reported that Globocak had been recaptured. Everyone breathed with relief. The King arrived.

- News?

Cadorna answered:

- Globocak has been retaken.
- Thank goodness. I spent the whole night thinking of Globocak. That removes a great weight from my stomach.

It was a false tranquilliser, because Globocak had never been lost and no favourable inference could therefore be drawn from a recapture that had not occurred.

The morning nevertheless displayed moderate optimism based upon nothing. A trace appeared in a despatch sent to Rome at 10:49. It admitted that losses had been “grave, in men and artillery which had to be abandoned”, but stated that “this morning the offensive has paused” and counter-attacks were being considered.

The Supreme Command therefore possessed and gave the impression that the enemy offensive was returning to the normal rails: some territory lost, several units mauled, many dead and wounded and a fair number of prisoners. Yet what was war except the customary monotonous mixture of such ingredients, whether one attacked or remained on the defensive?

A few hours later, while the Boselli Government was overthrown in the Italian Chamber after a speech by the venerable Prime Minister greeted with enormous applause, Minister Sonnino told his Chief of Cabinet, Count Aldrovandi Marescotti, that a telegram from Cadorna received at that moment contained the word “disaster”.

The telegram had been transmitted at 7:47 p.m. and stated:

> The enemy offensive has resumed on the Saga-Stol-Luico front and upon the Lom plateau. The enemy attack has succeeded at Luico and Auzza.
>
> Losses in missing men and guns are exceedingly grave. About ten regiments surrendered en masse without fighting. I see a disaster taking shape, against which I shall struggle to the last.
>
> I have arranged resistance to the limit of possibility in the mountains and on the Karst and have prepared, without issuing it, the order to withdraw to the Tagliamento...

With firm pulse and fearless spirit, though with uncertain wisdom, Cadorna prepared to fight “to the last”. He continued reflecting upon the afternoon conversation with General Capello, asking himself not so much whether retreat was sooner or later unavoidable as whether it should be ordered immediately.

He was particularly concerned about moving the Second Army before the Third had safely disengaged.

At about half past eight a messenger from the Supreme Command therefore reached General Montuori, the new commander of the Second Army, carrying Cadorna's question whether immediate retreat was genuinely necessary.

Montuori telephoned his army-corps commanders to ask whether victorious resistance was possible and received affirmative answers. It could hardly have been otherwise, since the generals remembered the unhappy fate of men judged timid.

Instead of an order to withdraw, the Supreme Command therefore issued late at night an order for resistance to the bitter end upon the Monte Maggiore-Monte Jonaz-Monte Madlessena-Monte Purgessimo-Castel del Monte-Monte Korada-Monte Kuk-Vodice-Monte Santo-Dol saddle-Salcano line. It was to be defended “to the last man”:

> It is necessary to multiply ourselves and demand the greatest effort from everyone; immediately repress every sign of weakness; contest the ground inch by inch and at any cost bar the invader's road.
>
> Faith and tenacity will give us victory.

Cadorna himself was able to observe how little those words could influence a situation now approaching complete chaos when he attempted to assemble a council of war at Bergogna for eleven o'clock. He, General Porro and the King waited impatiently at Nimis to reach Bergogna, but were prevented by the

congestion on the approach roads and the traffic jam which had frozen road movement. Unable to pass San Gervasio, they had to cancel the meeting.

The attempt to resist along the line where the valleys opened onto the plain drew forward units previously intended, in agreement with General Capello, to hold the Torre line and receive the retreating army beneath their protection.

Precautionary measures for organising the retreat behind the Tagliamento continued to remain in the drawer. Cadorna himself informed the Ministry of War at 11:10 on 26 October:

> ... Every measure is being taken for a withdrawal to the Tagliamento, but the order has not been circulated.

The one o'clock bulletin, influenced by revived hopes, remained reticent:

> ... From Monte Maggiore to west of Auzza we have withdrawn to our frontier line. In consequence of this withdrawal, we have had to arrange the evacuation of the Bainsizza plateau...

Compressing into two words the abandonment of the Bainsizza, whose victorious capture still rang in everyone's ears, was nevertheless a harsh blow to public opinion.

War correspondents were less reticent, but in the direction opposite to truth. On the 27th the Giornale d'Italia wrote:

> It is absolutely false that the enemy has crossed the frontier north of Cividale. However great his forces and means, he will be unable to break the true line of resistance. The Command is perfectly calm and confident.

At that moment the Germans had already occupied Cividale. Although reasonably calm because such was Cadorna's character, the Supreme Command was by no means “confident”.

During the night of the 26th the semi-official Stefani Agency transmitted a summary of events pitched much less optimistically. No forecast was possible, the agency note stated, and the situation was “undoubtedly grave”. It merely hoped that the enemy would tread as briefly as possible “the strip of the Fatherland upon which he was about to set foot”.

Enemy bulletins now destroyed those hopes. The Austrian communiqué of the 26th, summarising events to the evening of the 25th, stated:

> ... The greatest confusion reigns in various forms among the retreating Italians. So far thirty thousand prisoners have passed through the Allied concentration points and approximately three hundred captured guns have been counted.

In the bulletin of the 27th, the number of prisoners had risen to sixty thousand.

The precarious psychological balance attained by the Italian Command on the evening of the 25th shattered during the evening of the 26th. Events on the battlefield brought it back to reality.

At about nine that evening, summoned by telegram from Rome, Deputy General Antonino Di Giorgio arrived in Udine. General Cadorna intended to entrust him with command of a special corps of two divisions responsible for defending the Pinzano bridges over the Tagliamento.

The formation of this new army corps, later the “Special Army Corps”, was precautionary. Its purpose was to guarantee that a further enemy thrust could not cross the Upper Tagliamento while the right of the Second Army and the Third Army remained deployed on or immediately behind the Isonzo.

At that moment the fall of Monte Maggiore was announced. Earlier orders had identified it as the indispensable hinge between the Carnia Corps and the left of the Second Army, a hinge that could not be released if retreat was to be avoided. Colonel Gatti relates:

> It is a thunderbolt. At that moment the Chief had returned from a walk with Porro and Di Giorgio. He had taken his usual mint and said cheerfully to Gabba: “Well then, if you require nothing else from me, I shall go to bed.”
>
> Notice that this cheerfulness of his is gigantic, because Gallarati told me that yesterday, the 25th, he saw him cry for the first time in his life. At a certain point, speaking of the situation, he placed his hands over his eyes, bowed his head and wept. Then he recovered.
>
> The General immediately recovers again. He stands calm and enormous. He orders the mountain recaptured at any cost. Then, without saying anything, he climbs the stairs and disappears above.

Monte Maggiore had fallen, although supposedly defended by seven Alpini battalions under one of the best men, Colonel Sapienza. In reality not seven but two battalions were assigned to defend Monte Maggiore. The others, Colonel Sapienza told the Commission of Inquiry, “never arrived”, while the two had run out of ammunition and water.

At 11:20 p.m. on 26 October an order in extremis signed by Cadorna was sent to Second Army headquarters, urging the recapture of Monte Maggiore:

> It appears that Monte Maggiore has been abandoned and that our troops have withdrawn to Monte Aperta-Santa Trinità. Issue the most energetic orders so that this occupation is immediately restored by counter-attack. Ensure in every case the timely execution of all planned road demolitions.

Consequently, ten minutes before midnight, General Etna, the new commander of the left wing of the Second Army, called upon his troops to defend “to the last man” the line of resistance and recapture those of its positions “already occupied by the enemy”.

The immediate effects of these cascading orders fell upon Colonel Sapienza, who with exceedingly few men found himself compelled to attempt the recovery of the same Monte Maggiore that he had abandoned a few hours earlier on his personal responsibility because it was almost completely surrounded.

The attempt failed miserably without even slowing the enemy advance.

Retreat behind the Tagliamento had become unavoidable. During that same night the Supreme Command issued the relevant orders.

At 2:30 a.m. on 27 October:

> To Carnia Zone headquarters... in order to protect the left of the Army withdrawing to the Tagliamento, that Army Corps is immediately to begin a gradual movement of retreat...

At 2:50 a.m. on 27 October:

> To Third Army headquarters... that Third Army is immediately to begin movement of retreat to the right bank of the Tagliamento in the manner indicated... coordinated with the Second Army, which begins the same movement today...

At 3:30 a.m. on 27 October:

> To Second Army headquarters... in view of the situation created on the left of that Army in the Monte Maggiore region, I have decided to begin gradual withdrawal to the right bank of the Tagliamento... The Third Army also begins gradual withdrawal today...

The Fourth Army, holding Cadore, received advance warning of retreat in the highly probable event, according to Cadorna, that no more than a brief halt could be made on the Tagliamento and withdrawal would have to continue at least as far as the Piave.

Apart from the First Army, therefore, the whole Italian army might be, and in reality was, set in motion within several days. According to the available statistics, this meant 1,600,000 men who, abandoning their hated but familiar trenches, had to move at hazard in open country according to schemes that neither they nor their generals had ever practised.

It might be salvation or catastrophe. It was almost catastrophe; it was salvation.

The outcome of the Battle of Caporetto surprised the Italian army. Through a strange play of fate, or more probably the work of agents provocateurs, the infantryman's bulletin - as the rumours passed from mouth to mouth concerning the day's events were called, a bulletin no less appetising and far more revered than Cadorna's - reported astonishing news on 25 October. The Germans had attempted an attack near Tolmino, received a solemn beating and lost ten thousand prisoners.

Several days later, amid full rout, the same bulletin confidently reported an overwhelming counter-offensive by the Third Army and the landing of Italian units at Trieste.

In reality fairly hard fighting occurred on the Third Army front from 24 to 27 October. The First Isonzo Army under General Würm, faithful to the commitment undertaken within von Below's general offensive plan, attacked XI and XIII Corps frontally at their junction between Castagnevizza and Faiti Hrib.

When the order to retreat reached the Third Army, the 14th and 58th Divisions had been heavily worn down by repeated attacks and counter-attacks for possession of the bloodstained hill. No important position had been lost, however, and the Third Army could withdraw in good order without pressure from the Austro-Hungarian army, which, like the Italian army, had been stiffened by many years of trench warfare that deprived troops and above all services of mobility.

The surprise of Caporetto exploded like a bomb in ground already mined. It exploded among soldiers of the Third, Fourth and First Armies who knew nothing of it, among those of the Second who had not been overwhelmed, and in Rome, Paris, London, Vienna and Berlin. The Russians, Americans and Japanese, too occupied or too distant, were unmoved.

It appeared a resounding and sudden defeat, suggesting to Angelo Gatti the Battle of Gaugamela, in which Darius Codomannus, Great King of the Persians, was defeated by Alexander the Great in 331 BC.

With his customary cynicism, General Wilson summarised the strategies of the Entente and the Central Empires as follows:

1. We take Bullecourt; they take Romania.
2. We take Messines; they take Russia.
3. We fail to take Passchendaele; they take Italy.

By contrast, and not illogically from his point of view, the Kaiser was “exultant” and prepared to visit the new Italian conquests.

“Fortunately,” Winston Churchill writes, “trees do not grow to the sky.” Nor did the Central Empires' offensive against Italy grow to the sky.

Conceived to attain objectives not exceeding the field of grand tactics - the strategic purpose being reserved for the offensive in preparation on the Western Front - it soon revealed its limits and exhausted

itself, though not before the Italian soldier had to display all his courage to prevent Italy from falling into complete ruin.

A separate peace would certainly not have saved Italy from such ruin. At that moment it was the most disastrous solution, because Italy was captive to Allied supplies while the Central Empires were being strangled by the Entente blockade; hunger and famine would have devastated us on a scale unknown since the barbarian ages.

The danger was nevertheless great, and the lesson was neither understood nor absorbed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

WHAT HAPPENED AFTERWARDS

The earliest-rising citizens who approached the newspaper kiosks on 29 October 1917 with the customary request, “Give me a pennyworth of lies”, opened their eyes wide when they saw the communiqué issued by the Supreme Command on the previous afternoon:

> The failure of units of the Second Army to resist, as they cowardly withdrew without fighting or shamefully surrendered to the enemy, has enabled Austro-German forces to break our left wing on the Julian front. The courageous efforts of the other troops have failed to prevent the adversary from penetrating the sacred soil of the Fatherland.
>
> Our line is withdrawing according to the established plan. The stores and depots in the evacuated towns have been destroyed.
>
> The courage displayed by our soldiers in so many memorable battles fought and won during two and a half years of war gives the Supreme Command confidence that on this occasion too the army, to which the honour and salvation of the country have been entrusted, will know how to do its duty.
>
> General Cadorna

The readers did not know that on that morning not a pennyworth but an entire treasure of lies was being sold for the modest price of five centesimi.

Shortly afterwards the newspapers carrying Cadorna's communiqué were seized and replaced by new and less generous editions, in which the opening lines were softened as follows:

> The violence of the attack and the inadequate resistance of certain units of the Second Army have enabled, etc., etc.

The order to modify the text had come from Rome, from Orlando himself. He attempted to stifle the “scandal” not so much from love of the truth, which no one yet knew, as from generic faith in the technique of smoothing matters over, in the name of which he transformed “failure to resist” into “inadequate resistance”.

Meanwhile the bulletin had been circulated abroad from the new headquarters at Treviso, where, in the absence of police subordinate to the Italian Government, only the unaltered text became known.

A much more poisonous version, however, was mysteriously placed in circulation that same evening and appeared in provincial editions or was passed from hand to hand in mimeographed form:

> Because of the strong pressure of the adversary, but still more because of the ignoble treason of certain formations of the Second Army, more precisely the Roma, Pesaro, Foggia and Elba Brigades, the enemy has been able to invade the sacred soil of the Fatherland. May God and the Fatherland curse them, and may mud and shame cover them for ever.

The names of the accused brigades changed according to city and edition, while the tone remained unchanged. Someone hostile to Cadorna was trying to make him slip farther than he had slipped unaided.

Italy held its breath. So that was why the enemy had prevailed: a handful of renegades had played Judas, and the “military strike” was the fruit of treason.

The explanation was believed at the time, and with satisfaction. Revelation of the true causes of the Caporetto rout would have caused much deeper discouragement: incompetence among commands, gross errors, disobedience, lack of professional preparation and inadequate training.

Had the real causes been known and publicised, the idea might also have arisen that the disaster was irreparable. The word “treason”, however, has always been a convenient excuse behind which to conceal errors. It is a screen offering secure protection, and on this occasion too acted as a catalyst for national spirit. Without treason, who could say how far we might have advanced?

General Giardino shared this view and expressed the following balanced judgement:

> The psychological historian will also have to decide whether these moral reagents, certainly and immediately effective in the disappointment of a deception - indeed, of that deception - would not instead have been much less effective, or late, in the face of less noble causes, including loss of confidence in the hierarchy because of incapacity for command or bad government of men, of such a kind as to have produced the immense reverse.

The only people dissatisfied with this explanation, for obvious reasons, were the Austro-Germans. If the Italians were to lose heart completely, they had to know that not traitors but fools had led them to ruin.

On 30 October threatening but harmless aircraft scattered leaflets over our columns retreating along the roads of Friuli:

> Italians! Italians!
>
> General Cadorna's communiqué of 28 October will have opened your eyes to the enormous catastrophe that has struck your army. At this moment of extreme gravity for your nation, your Commander-in-Chief resorts to a strange device to excuse the collapse. He has the audacity to accuse your army, which so many times hurled itself at his command into useless and desperate attacks. This is your reward for courage.
>
> You have shed your blood in so many battles. The enemy himself never denied you the esteem owed to courageous opponents. And your Commander-in-Chief dishonours and insults you in order to excuse himself.

The enemy war bulletins likewise carefully avoided suggesting that victory had been won cheaply, almost as a military promenade through hordes of traitors or cowards. Their continual emphasis instead lay upon the enormous difficulties of the advance and the obstacles of every kind placed by nature and men.

On 25 October the Austrian bulletin stated that “the enemy defended himself stubbornly”, while the German communiqué mentioned:

> ... the tenacious resistance of the Italians, which had to be broken in many places through bitter hand-to-hand fighting.

The Austrian bulletin of the 26th reported the greatest confusion among the retreating Italians. Yet even there, entire major formations had surrendered only because, “completely cut off”, they were compelled to lay down their arms in the open field.

On 27 October the Austrian bulletin exalted the courage of the Kaiserjäger and the Styrian and Tyrolean riflemen, who had won through “their stubborn tenacity and vigour”. “What all the troops forcing a passage through the buttresses of the Julian Alps towards the Italian plain have accomplished in combat and on the march is beyond all praise,” said the German communiqué of the same day. The reports of the 28th and 29th still spoke of “obstinate” fighting and conquests “torn from the enemy”.

Finally, in an interview granted to the Budapest Pesti Hírlap, Marshal Boroevic said at the end of November that the charge of cowardice against the Italian troops was “unjust and incorrect”. In his opinion the cause of defeat lay in the fact that the troops “felt command slipping away from them”.

After the battle and war had ended and emotions calmed, there was a strong German temptation to ridicule Italian resistance and describe our soldiers as unwarlike and undignified in comparison with resolute Teutons.

German historiography oscillated, and still oscillates, between those extremes: now exalting the difficulty of the undertaking and fury of the struggle, now giving greater weight to the numerous episodes of flight, abandonment of positions and sudden collapses which gave the resistance of the Italian army an undulating appearance and proved the truth of the judgement pronounced by a seventeenth-century warrior: “God does not give courage; He lends it.”

In Italy, and consequently among the Allied nations, the legend of Caporetto acquired different shapes and shades according to the moment and social class.

Some maintained that the treason enabling the Austro-Germans to penetrate our lines had been committed by a few forward formations, with which the mass later sympathised by putting the “military strike” into effect.

Among the ordinary ranks, by contrast, the rumour gained credibility that officers of fairly high rank had perpetrated the betrayal. At the end of October uncontrolled reports said Cadorna had been sent before a military tribunal. Others whispered of generals and colonels shot at Padua, through whose station a trainload of handcuffed officers had passed. According to other versions Capello was the traitor and about to be condemned to death.

The most original note was sounded by Minister Crespi, who travelled to London at the end of 1917 and, not knowing what to answer when asked how and why Caporetto had occurred, said our retreat had been imposed by inadequate nourishment of the army - almost as though by allowing part of it to be captured we avoided feeding those men and had more available for the rest.

The word “treason” began circulating extremely early. On the very evening of 24 October Lieutenant Cicchetti, hospitalised for two months because of exceedingly grave wounds suffered on Kobilek, witnessed the arrival of numerous seriously wounded officers, one of whom confusedly insisted upon accusing certain “traitors”.

Among units not directly involved in the battle, the legend of treason easily took hold, assisted by the bulletin of 28 October. One of its many versions blamed the collapse upon soldiers recruited from among the protagonists of the Turin uprising and sent to Caporetto “as punishment”.

With supreme inconsistency, the highest authorities were nevertheless supposed to have relied upon the tranquillity of the sector and therefore feared no defection by those shirkers.

Was it true, Lieutenant Lentini asked himself, that the defeatists, this horde of outcasts, had prepared the disgrace? Why send them into the line as punishment? Why not regard the front line as a place of glory and honour? Without training, cohesion and fighting spirit troops possessed no value and could not hold.

Why then strengthen them with shirkers and factory workers softened by cowardly fear of danger, by false and hypocritical renunciation of their freedom, and by the seductions of the long-promised and desired end of the war?

“I felt enormous contempt,” wrote a lieutenant stationed on the Asiago plateau, “for the troops which had failed to contain the advance.” “Yet,” he added, gripped by doubt, “I also felt distrust towards the commanders who had failed to foresee the blow.”

“O Italy, how dearly you pay for the hour of madness of four unworthy men,” Captain Gualtiero Castellini exclaimed. In his view, the Italians who yielded there deserved, for no clear reason, to be “Turks or Bulgarians”.

The victims of such undeserved feelings were naturally the troops of the Second and also the Third Army, especially those mentioned in the apocryphal bulletins of 28 October.

- Ah, you belong to the “Runaway Brigade”!

This was how the unfortunate men of the Friuli, Caltanissetta, Alessandria, Puglie and Roma Brigades were addressed, because they lacked the foresight, unlike many comrades, to tear off their collar patches.

> They treat us of the Second Army as fugitives and traitors. They keep us like prisoners. Then they send circulars saying the soldiers must be treated well in order to restore their morale.

Artillery Lieutenant Antonio Gorlino wrote this to his family on 4 December. His testimony carries weight, because Gorlino was a courageous man who died during the Battle of the Piave and received the Gold Medal posthumously.

Lieutenant Muccini wrote:

> ... Women shout after us that we are traitors and cowards...

How was this celebrated treason supposed to have occurred? A propaganda booklet intended for ordinary soldiers and published during the first months of 1918 attributed to the men a feeling that their officers had betrayed them. The booklet took the form of a grotesque dialogue between a soldier and an unknown interlocutor who spoke with the voice of wisdom.

“It was the officers,” said the soldier, “who sold us. They made us run.” The interlocutor saw matters differently. According to him, these Italian simpletons had fallen into a trap set by Austrian duplicity.

The Austrians conducted active propaganda in favour of fraternisation, saying that both sides should throw down their arms. On the night before the agreed understanding, however, the formations of false fraternisation advocates were replaced by German battalions unaware of those arrangements. Seeing the Italians throw down their rifles, it was logical that the Germans should advance.

As for the officers who ordered their men not to fight, they were plainly spies in disguise. The dying Habsburg Empire, incapable of facing a struggle openly as gentlemen do, had been compelled to resort to such disloyal methods.

Macaulay Trevelyan was on leave in Britain when the rout occurred. Writing a memoir of the Italian war at the end of 1918, he gave the version of Caporetto circulating in his own environment. He maintained that whole regiments deliberately abandoned their posts and intentionally surrendered:

> I can say very little about actual treason, because I was not in that sector and the ambulances of our Section had been withdrawn before the accused regiments were sent there. It is well known that these were composed in large part of several thousand workers from shell factories who had taken part in the recent Turin uprising. Gathering those men at Caporetto as punishment was not a particularly fortunate idea.
>
> According to what I heard from people present in that sector during the weeks preceding the disaster, the soldiers made no secret of their intentions, and many officers were afraid of their men

> and prudently locked themselves in at night. Some of those troops in fact refused gifts customarily distributed to front-line soldiers by patriotic committees and explained their refusal by saying they did not wish to regard themselves as destined to remain much longer in military service.
>
> As I understand it, this seriously alarmed several people in Venice and was probably known in other regions of northern and southern Italy. Since betrayals had been extremely rare in the Italian army, however, and Caporetto was considered a quiet sector, the responsible authorities allowed matters to drift.

Trevelyan, in his goodness, nevertheless warned that “the five hundred thousand men of the Second Army” must not be condemned en masse.

George Macaulay Trevelyan was a distinguished historian, thoroughly versed in the history of Britain as well as Italy. If his critical palate was satisfied by so crude a version, one may imagine the others.

Several months later, in February 1919, Colonel Enrico Barone, a well-known publicist, published a military history of our war up to Caporetto, dedicated to “mothers in mourning”. The mothers in mourning did not prevent him from accepting, without verification, legends insulting to their fallen sons.

Fifteen months after the events, the treason version was losing ground while that of the “military strike” rose:

> The Plezzo position was immediately broken through because the troops of the 50th Division defending the lines on the valley floor broke and surrendered without fighting.

Although the war had ended, Barone had still heard nothing of the extermination of the 87th Infantry through phosgene. All the more, the march of the Silesian 12th Division towards Caporetto appeared to him the result of unconditional surrenders.

On the left bank of the Isonzo, enemy troops had broken through at Gabrie because the garrison of that stretch of forward line “had surrendered”, while the Foggia battalions gathered around Caporetto for the final defence had thrown down their arms “without fighting”.

If the large quantity of artillery emplaced on the Raunza ridge could not assist in stopping the enemy, this was because on the right:

> in the Volzana and Cemponi ridge trenches on the front of the 19th Division, its defence was no less weak - indeed, there was no real defence - than that of the 46th Division troops on the valley floor.

Colonel Barone sensed that the High Commands had failed to provide “effective direction”. But how could an “impartial” critic accuse them of inadequate capacity for command when the instrument in their hands had broken apart?

> Who, therefore, would feel able to place grave blame upon Army headquarters and the army-corps commands because they could not resort to the tactical devices in which they were expert, as they had demonstrated many times during the war, when they possessed genuinely resistant and courageous troops under their command rather than drunken conglomerations of cynical passivity, as several formations revealed themselves, determined not to resist because that, in their opinion, would bring the war to an end?

No serious “investigator”, Colonel Barone hurriedly concluded, could “diminish his own spirit” so far as to discover in the conduct of those commands any reason capable of explaining the immense disaster. The commands had behaved with textbook perfection.

After stating that entire brigades had thrown down their arms merely because large enemy patrols ordered them to surrender and “declared them surrounded”, however, he found it difficult to explain the subsequent victorious resistance on the Piave.

Barone, though easily causing soldiers to surrender, did not surrender easily himself. In his opinion the principal reason for the revival of military spirit was that most of the “poisoned” men fell prisoner, detoxifying the army through their absence.

The legend of Caporetto displayed a leathery resistance to time. Writing his war memoirs between 1924 and 1929, Artillery Lieutenant Colonel Ildebrando Flores returned to the subject. For him the explanation of German formations substituted at the last moment for Austrian units which had prepared the ground for fraternisation remained valid.

The march of the 12th Division appeared so daring to Flores that he regarded it as imprudent. Since the Germans were not known for imprudence, they must have secured free passage along the banks of the Isonzo through treason.

This voluntary defection became the signal provoking a strike by the mass:

> At the first cannon shots resistance appeared vain to several men. This attitude influenced those who watched passively. Immediate reactions were absent and the wave overwhelmed everything. The naive conviction that the war could be ended spread in a flash even among the uncertain, already hypnotised by the word peace, and in a moment of collective weakness that single word possessed the magical power of opening the road to the invader.

As more precise knowledge of events developed - knowledge still imperfect because of the General Staff's continuing silence - the theses of treason and the military strike slowly lost ground. They are nevertheless sometimes resurrected and accepted even today.

The origins of the “Caporetto legend” must be sought in the army-corps and divisional headquarters first struck by the enemy's fury.

On the evening of 24 October General Badoglio informed the Second Army that the Puglie Brigade, personally deployed by him, had abandoned its assigned positions without fighting. He reported Globocak as lost while it remained in our possession.

At noon on 25 October General Caviglia telephoned Capello that the Roma Brigade, as reported by one of his divisional commanders, had surrendered to the enemy. Although in 1933 he made an honest and painful admission of this careless report, for which he was not responsible, that did nothing on 25 October 1917 to defend the good name of the Roma.

As for the Arno Brigade, it was the commander of VII Corps who defamed it.

Armed with these reports, General Capello hastened dutifully to inform the Supreme Command:

> Although many formations did their duty well, many others did not, offering no resistance at all or resisting in a derisory manner.

Cadorna hastened to telegraph the echo to Rome, announcing that ten regiments had surrendered without fighting.

On the following day, 26 October, Father Semeria questioned General Cadorna after seeing him walking through the headquarters garden. Cadorna answered:

- What can one do when the soldiers will not fight? One reaps what has been sown, especially among the new recruits.

By then he had formed a precise opinion based upon information directly received and upon the sight of the hordes of stragglers swarming towards Cividale and Udine.

Capello and Cadorna were nevertheless too experienced as professionals to believe blindly the nonsense being circulated and accept the prescription that, “if six people out of ten, leaders or soldiers, had resolutely preferred the Fatherland to their own skins”, defeat would have been avoided.

Extending that reasoning, one could logically maintain that if every Italian soldier had killed at least one Austrian - was it so difficult to kill a single Austrian during thirty months of war, when Tom Mix disposed of ten Indians an hour in Wild West films? - the Austrian army would have disappeared.

It is therefore interesting to follow the origins of the Caporetto legend among the highest civilian and military authorities through the testimony of Olindo Malagodi, editor of the Tribuna.

Malagodi received his first revelations from an officer on 28 October:

> No one knows or understands why, but every strongest position, considered impregnable at the head of the valleys, was abandoned together with its artillery.

On 30 October Malagodi held a long conversation with Senator Albertini, who had returned from Treviso after meeting Cadorna:

> There are absolutely inexplicable facts. The Austrians reached Caporetto extremely early in the morning after crossing two of our exceedingly strongly fortified trench systems without the slightest alarm or rifle shot being heard, and succeeded in surprising and capturing one of our headquarters. Most of the troops did not fight. When sent forward they threw down their arms and returned unarmed so that the carabinieri could not drive them back.

Albertini was plainly referring to the panic and confusion at the iron bridge of Caporetto. He continued:

> It appeared that an understanding existed. Groups formed and shouted: “We want to end it! We no longer wish to fight! We want peace!” The Foggia, Reggio and Roma Brigades behaved in the most shameful manner, surrendering en masse without fighting. The Roma Brigade shouted: “Long live the Pope!”

The Reggio Brigade was not even on the Isonzo front. General Caviglia reconstructed the painful history of the Roma many years later.

A further conversation with Albertini on 2 November:

> At headquarters in Treviso there is strong suspicion of treason in the first incident of that ill-fated day: the sudden arrival of the Austrians at Caporetto without any alarm. The suspicion is strengthened by the fact that something similar had already been attempted by us in Trentino.

The allusion referred to the Carzano incident, which ended unhappily during the night of 17-18 September 1917. There the cooperation of several Czechs serving in the enemy ranks opened a breach in the Trentino front which we were unable to exploit. We lost five hundred prisoners against two hundred Austrians captured.

If anything, the episode demonstrated that the success of a strategic action could not be based upon such understandings.

“There was no battle,” one of Malagodi's correspondents reported after returning from the front.

Orlando, now Prime Minister, found the conduct of the retreating stragglers incredible. Calm and without any thought of sedition, they respectfully saluted him and the King. General Cadorna and General Giardino received the same respectful homage when, through a mishap on 7 November, they

were isolated amid a column of several thousand stragglers who, had they wished, could have torn them apart without leaving a trace.

According to Orlando there was only one possible and incredible explanation: “that in the minds of thousands of men a single idea suddenly arose and imposed itself - to go home.”

By 6 November, while the Army was still withdrawing towards the Piave, it was plain that many things were not plain at all.

Returning from the front, Giovanni Amendola spoke of the mystery of XXVII Army Corps. How had the Austrians crossed two lines of trenches without the smallest sound of fighting?

> ... XXVII Corps melted away and mysteriously vanished, leaving an enormous gap.
>
> There are indications creating suspicion of an understanding. Many men plainly threw down their rifles in the belief that, being disarmed, they could not be sent forward again. It should nevertheless be noted that at the Tagliamento bridges rifles were taken from everyone to prevent the formation of armed bands.

Malagodi deliberately asked Amendola:

- No military errors, then?

Amendola replied:

- Naturally headquarters says nothing about them and prefers to find responsibility elsewhere. But some people are beginning to speak in whispers.

On 13 November Bissolati, who deserved the credit for coining the expression “military strike”, returned to the mysterious Silesian advance:

> This is the obscure point: how they succeeded in passing our formidable Vodil barrier and then the second one behind the Isonzo. This first surprise, this mysterious breakthrough in a narrow and secondary sector, was the origin of everything.

While the mystery of Caporetto remained, Bissolati gave broad credence to reports of psychological collapse:

> That headquarters no longer possessed any moral contact with the soldiers is shown by the fact that twelve Badoglio battalions upon which reliance had been placed for the counter-attack flatly refused to fight, then threw down their rifles and surrendered en masse.
>
> It appeared that the soldiers had suddenly lost their reason. They sang the Workers' Hymn and a new song: Farewell, my beauty, farewell - I shall make the peace myself.

“Can this truly be the Italy of the masses,” exclaimed Bissolati, whose bitter fate had indeed caused him to lose his own reason, “and are we poor Don Quixotes in search of ideal adventures?”

Malagodi's most interesting meeting at the end of November was with Cadorna, who was about to leave for Versailles. How, Malagodi asked, had what happened occurred?

- What can I tell you? What happened was absolutely unforeseeable. It was not a battle and not a panic. It was a rebellion, or rather a military defection without precedent in history. More than six hundred thousand men suddenly refused to fight. They believed they could end the war by throwing down their weapons and going home.

Because this absolute novelty “without precedent in history” was sufficient to leave Cadorna himself doubtful, he attempted to justify it, more to himself than others, through an almost mathematical deduction: “Only that can explain the overwhelming of exceedingly strong positions.”

Plainly the sins of his generals had not yet emerged. Doubts nevertheless remained:

> None of this can be explained by cowardice among soldiers who fought before and fought afterwards.

Malagodi did not conceal his disbelief:

- The hypothesis of treason appeared more probable in the former war of movement, where it was sufficient for a general to lead the corps entrusted to him in the wrong direction to cause catastrophe. In this positional war, however, treason requires a universal understanding. How is that possible?

Cadorna replied:

- Your observation is correct, and I myself cannot account for it. Yet how else can the sudden crossing of those formidable lines without any sign of resistance be explained?

They therefore returned to the starting point: defection and collapse. “There can be no doubt.” The Germans would never have risked their reputation without a safe trump card.

For the moment Cadorna's deductions ended there. Three days later Amendola reported those of Capello, Montuori, Cavaciocchi and other senior figures whom he had interviewed:

> It was a strike, possessing a criminal and an unconscious component, so to speak.

All three army corps - IV, XXVII and VII - had thrown down their arms and broken apart:

> The stragglers came down calmly and smiling, without weapons, saying: “We have made peace.” Our peasants are such fools that the units behind them believed it.
>
> Many military men believe the situation might have been remedied by constructing behind the fleeing masses, or rather those going home and striking, a dam of machine guns. Placed between certain death and the duty of facing mediocre enemy formations, they might have thrown themselves against the latter.

Such sinister retrospective proposals one month after the events demonstrated that knowledge of what happened had not advanced a single step. Those who knew remained silent.

Only on 3 January 1918 did Bissolati experience his first doubts. His judgement concerning responsibility had “changed somewhat” and that of headquarters was “perhaps greater than it initially appeared”.

On 16 February Malagodi learned further details:

> Amendola tells me that precise information which will be clarified by the inquiries places beyond doubt that the responsibility of headquarters at Caporetto was greater than it appeared, greatly lessening that of the soldiers, especially at the beginning.
>
> Our position astride the river, from which the enemy came, was particularly weak. Capello superimposed, as it were, a plan of his own upon Cadorna's in order to gain the credit for a success prepared by himself.

The following day Malagodi met Cadorna again after his return to Rome. The former Chief of the General Staff still believed that some betrayal had occurred:

> I was not present and cannot say how matters happened. I imagine them as follows. There cannot have been widespread treason, but some local betrayals must have occurred and opened the breaches.

Malagodi nevertheless placed before him what he had learned from Amendola and asked whether it was credible.

- There is some truth in it, Cadorna admitted.

The truth was slowly making its way forward. Speaking with Colonel Gatti at Versailles on 2 February 1918, Cadorna recognised that if Plezzo was a grave wound, Caporetto was the mortal one, because the envelopment of IV Corps became possible only through the breakthrough of XXVII Corps, commanded by Badoglio, who had refused to answer a questionnaire Cadorna sent him at the beginning of December.

Albertini explained these details to Malagodi on 22 April:

> One of the gravest responsibilities for Caporetto will prove to have been Badoglio's, because it was precisely his corps, XXVII, which immediately gave way, retreating in great disorder upon XXIV Corps [41], skilfully commanded by Caviglia and the only one that fought well. IV Corps under Cavaciocchi was almost entirely the victim of XXVII Corps.

The theory of the military strike nevertheless produced strange relapses. On 3 July 1918 Bissolati was still wondering how the Army's spirit revived after Caporetto and continued to rely upon a miraculous explanation:

> There are mysterious strengths and weaknesses in the soul of crowds.

On 16 November 1918 General Diaz remained in the grip of the same uncertainty, although at that moment he was the victorious commander of the Army which had finally overwhelmed the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Asked how the demoralisation leading to Caporetto had arisen, his first non-committal answer was:

- Well...

He then added that Caporetto had not originated in general demoralisation of the Army but in the demoralisation of “several formations”. The new Chief of the General Staff therefore showed himself no better informed than his predecessor.

Only ten months later did publication of the report prepared by the Commission of Inquiry into the Battle of Caporetto, appointed by the Orlando Cabinet on 12 January 1918, cast partial light upon the events leading to the gigantic defeat.

The light was partial because everything concerning XXVII Army Corps and its former commander, General Badoglio - who had meanwhile risen to Deputy Chief of the General Staff and entered the pantheon of Heroes as the “victor of Vittorio Veneto” - was deliberately and shamelessly kept in shadow.

This partly explains why people continued to speak of the military strike and defection for years and decades.

When the Commission of Inquiry's report was published, the war had long been over, but times were hard - indeed exceedingly hard - and the future dark. The Prime Minister of the day, the Honourable Nitti, who had coined the expression "Great Nicaragua" for Italy, took satisfaction in having concluded the parliamentary debate upon the Commission's report no later than 14 September 1919. His final words at that sitting were:

> No one can claim to be free from error, but we must forget one another's errors. Let us forget them in the vision of the greatness of the results achieved.

With these theatrical phrases the report of the Commission of Inquiry was buried. It remains in the tomb.

By the moral standard prevailing then and now, the Italian army was honourably defeated at Caporetto. Where resistance held, it continued; where matters began to go badly, they turned worse. No single error committed would by itself have produced defeat. Taken together, defeat became inevitable.

It would plainly be absurd to expect the Italian soldier of 1917 to have identified his fate with that of Italy. Not even Hitler's fanatical genius succeeded in instilling such feelings into every member of his carefully selected SS. Episodes such as those occurring on the iron bridge at Caporetto are so natural that the opposite would have been astonishing. When the ordinary soldier without guidance saw carabinieri stop armed men and send them back into the line, while disarmed men were directed more comfortably towards the rear, he could hardly have behaved so stoically as to choose personal ruin rather than personal safety. Such behaviour would have been a miracle - one that inspires admiration when attributed to the three hundred at Thermopylae, but incredulity when assigned to three million conscript soldiers recruited by compulsion.

The Battle of Caporetto must also be examined from other viewpoints. The Italian side admits that losses during the fifteen days of retreat amounted to 290,000 prisoners, 10,000 dead and 30,000 wounded. Yet the Commission of Inquiry estimated Italian army losses during October at 22,000 dead and 48,000 wounded. Apart from Caporetto, that month witnessed only actions of lesser importance, responsible at most for the loss of several thousand men.

No one will dare maintain that a battle in which Italian bloody losses amounted perhaps to forty thousand men, and far more probably to seventy thousand, was not a fierce battle. It is therefore impossible that one side simply ran away.

Accustomed to the massacres of positional warfare, public opinion was as unprepared as the High Commands, which planned battles but did not see them, for the different relationship characteristic of Blitzkrieg. From 1917 to the present another war, far more complex than the First World War, has entered history: a war entirely of movement, during which the relationship between bloody casualties and prisoners came much closer to Caporetto than to the Bainsizza. Nevertheless, the lessons supplied by this experience, which were unavailable thirty years ago, have not been used to understand more clearly the collapse of the Italian army during the days of Caporetto.

To lessen the responsibility of our commands, it is fair to cite examples of other distinguished figures on the opposing and Allied sides who unjustly maltreated their own soldiers. According to Ludendorff, the "mediocre" conduct of the Austrian troops contributed to the failure of the Strafexpedition against Italy in 1916. And what did the British say to justify the defeat inflicted upon them by the Germans around Cambrai on 30 November 1917, after their first mass employment of tanks had gained a brilliant victory? That the reverse resulted from the soldiers' inefficient conduct.

Insulting the soldiers was therefore a conventional lie, motivated not by sheer wickedness but by the desire to defend the professional competence of the General Staffs at any cost.

Sooner or later those who had accepted the legend of Caporetto in good faith changed their minds. General Rocca, commander of the 63rd Division of the Carnia XII Corps, captured after adventures worthy of a novel, attempted in prisoner-of-war camps to investigate the reliability of the accusations levelled against certain Second Army formations. The position of prisoner among prisoners was ideal for learning of any hidden background. Yet, Rocca says, "the information made me doubt the truth of the accusations gathered".

One of the last to be convinced was General Cadorna, but he too capitulated:

> ... Had my orders been fully carried out, particularly the order concerning counter-preparation fire, events would have developed differently even despite the troops' incomplete moral efficiency.

The Battle of Caporetto marked an important turning point in the composition of the Italian army and in the history of Italy itself. Because of the rout, with 350,000 men permanently lost and 400,000 stragglers temporarily unusable, most of the veterans of the Karst and the Bainsizza disappeared from the ranks. Many had gone behind barbed wire; sixty thousand were sent to fight in France with II Corps; the remainder were diluted among the different armies together with the very young men of the 1899 class, who had neither seen nor endured the Isonzo.

The army of Vittorio Veneto was therefore substantially different from the one that had assaulted Vodice, Monte Santo, San Gabriele and Hermada, and the combatants' psychology had also changed.

The soldiers of 1915, 1916 and 1917 were men shaped by Cadorna, who demanded conduct worthy of supernatural warriors expected, through fidelity to received commandments, to allow themselves to be killed without feeling pain. In such a body of men even the volunteer found no legitimate place.

Fifty years of post-Risorgimento education had presented this phantom soldier as the ideal figure, ready to sacrifice himself for King and Fatherland. On 24 October 1917 that old Italy suffered defeat and its history ended. It had given everything it could give and had failed beneath the strain.

The army and Italy that emerged after Caporetto had roots in the past but were products of new times. Less appeal was made to duty and greater reliance placed upon irrational enthusiasm, which required a more intense emotional component. The new crowd nevertheless had the defect of being commanded by old men. The end of the war healed this fracture, and the old leaders learned at their own expense that the profession of sorcerer's apprentice is dangerous.

For these reasons something more than the Austro-German offensive on the Upper Isonzo front began at two in the morning on 24 October 1917.

After the order to retreat was issued, one and a half million Italians, pursued by one million Austro-Germans, moved in forced marches towards the Tagliamento. Mingled with the uniformed multitude, half a million civilians dragged themselves lamentably forward, swept away by panic. Not since the barbarian invasions had Friuli witnessed such movement of human masses.

Many tens of thousands of men and endless columns of guns and lorries became trapped at the approaches to the bridges and were captured by the advancing enemy. Within several days the Tagliamento line itself proved indefensible and a new retreat became necessary, this time behind the Piave. During the latter movement, the Carnia XII Corps and the rearguard of the Fourth Army moving from Cadore were cut off and compelled to surrender.

Of the forty-five divisions that began withdrawing from the Isonzo front, only fifteen reached the Piave in condition to fight. Yet the rapid pursuit had also exhausted the pursuers, and the disorder of their advance was only slightly less than that of our retreat.

When, in mid-November, the Austro-Germans attempted to repeat upon the Piave and Brenta the blow delivered at Caporetto, without adequate forces and relying only upon recklessness, they were repulsed. An interminable battle then began and continued endemically until the end of the year. For fifty days the Austrians continued attacking, each time with several men and guns fewer than necessary, while the German divisions had already begun their return journey.

Our army resisted intrepidly and, at first, without assistance. At the beginning of December the Franco-British finally decided to commit the eleven divisions rapidly sent to Italy but deliberately kept out of

the fighting, through the not unfounded fear that they might be swept away uselessly in another retreat as far as the Adige. It then became clear that stabilisation was assured.

During the winter the reconstruction of the army was undertaken. The task was immense, but implementation was guaranteed by increased productive capacity and unrestricted availability of American supplies. The artillery, half of which had been lost, was completely rebuilt. Holdings of automatic weapons, motor vehicles and aircraft were increased.

The greatly shortened front, served by a rich network of communications, permitted a more economical defence. When the Austrians attacked again in mid-June 1918 with a plan far less brilliant than that of Caporetto and without German assistance, they were repulsed after an epic struggle. The Battle of the Solstice, 15-24 June 1918, marked the supreme - and final - effort of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

On 21 March 1918 Germany launched the great offensive on the Western Front against an enemy not yet appreciably supported by the North Americans. For ninety days the Allied front was hammered frenziedly; it was broken three times tactically and came close to being broken strategically.

Like the Lernaean Hydra, Germany appeared endowed with supernatural vitality. The fourth attempt, beginning on 15 July 1918, failed after several days, and there were no others. Germany lay exhausted, having lost eight hundred thousand of her sons in Flanders and Champagne within four months.

The Allied recovery then began, strengthened each day by American divisions now arriving in a continuous stream. At the moment of the armistice forty-two were in combat, equivalent in size and armament to at least seventy French divisions. Fighting continued with unprecedented violence until the final moment. During the ten days preceding the end of the war, losses on the Western Front amounted to 150,000 men.

At the end of September the Macedonian front collapsed and the composite Allied army, after occupying Bulgaria, marched upon the Danube. At the end of October Turkey collapsed. Her Syrian front disintegrated under General Allenby's blows while another British army advanced up the Tigris towards Mosul.

On 24 October Italy launched the final offensive against the tottering Austro-Hungarian Empire and its still solid army. The Battle of Vittorio Veneto ended on 3 November when Austria accepted and signed the armistice. Her defeat also marked the end of the great Danubian Empire.

Alone and isolated, Germany was compelled to capitulate despite desperate resistance. She had not been defeated in the open field, but surrendered to avoid defeat. At eleven o'clock on 11 November 1918 the weapons fell silent everywhere and silence returned.

The last war in the world had ended, after which there would be only peace and prosperity. Such was the opinion of the naive, held less firmly by sceptics and certainly not shared by a corporal of the Bavarian 16th Regiment named Adolf Hitler.

Each nation could turn to licking its wounds, which proved immensely greater not merely than forecasts but than what people believed they knew. Many combatants presumed to be prisoners never returned, and year by year the list of missing men lengthened. They had to be considered permanently dead. In Germany the fate of 170,000 soldiers remained unknown on 30 June 1923.

The same occurred in Italy. The Commission of Inquiry into Caporetto supplied the figure of 368,000 battle deaths, 135,000 of them between January and October 1917. This estimate, probably dating from the first months of 1919, must be regarded as greatly below reality.

When Italian prisoners were repatriated - received with the distrust deserved by participants in the "military strike" - it was discovered that one hundred thousand were missing from the half-million count, almost all having died of hunger and hardship. Year after year the number of missing men also increased. Since they never reappeared, they had to be regarded as dead.

Mussolini often liked to cite the number of dead in the First World War. In his speeches the figure rose from five hundred thousand to six hundred thousand, six hundred and fifty thousand and seven hundred thousand. This was not, however, an example of morbid Marinetti-like megalomania. The list of the dead truly continued to lengthen, and in 1931, when 709,000 had already been counted, the addition was still incomplete.

It is therefore probable, at least as regards the dead - not the wounded, who were easier to verify because they could claim and demand pensions - that the losses repeatedly cited in this book are perhaps fifty per cent too low. Deaths from disease have not been included either, although dying of pneumonia contracted in the trenches was not greatly different from dying beneath a shell.

During the final months of 1918 the other miseries were overlaid by the influenza epidemic, the greatest pestilence in recorded history. In Italy it caused the deaths of another five hundred thousand people, fortunately selected not among healthy young men but among the more emaciated and elderly of both sexes.

To total war losses must be added partial losses: more than one million wounded and tens of thousands mutilated or permanently disabled, including two thousand blind in both eyes, five thousand insane, three thousand mute, and so forth. Compared with 1915, the population in 1919 had fallen by one and a half million, something that did not occur during the Second World War.

The financial cost of the war was immense and has not yet ceased to be paid. Including indirect burdens, it is estimated at one hundred billion present-day dollars, equal to five or six years of national income in the Italy of that period.

It is therefore easy to understand why the Italy of Vittorio Veneto was in reality mortally wounded.

The fate of the figures who most influenced our military events in 1917 varied and bore no relation to their respective responsibilities. A blind god condemned or protected them.

On 9 November 1917 General Cadorna left command of the army in the hands of Armando Diaz, until then commander of XXIII Army Corps. The replacement had been decided obliquely, although on 30 October Prime Minister Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, in two telegrams sent an hour apart, had confirmed his complete faith, "linked with the admiration and sympathy with which I have always followed the work Your Excellency has performed..."

But someone had to pay for the unexpected defeat, and Cadorna was certainly not the most innocent. An attempt was made to sweeten the pill by appointing him Italian representative to the newly created Inter-Allied Military Council at Versailles. The sacrifice was requested, the new Minister of War General Alfieri said in a carefully measured letter, so that Cadorna might offer his service "in a broader field".

The old commander rebelled against this favourable treatment - "Give me command of a battalion if you still believe me capable of it" - refused the new office and immediately announced his resignation. Orlando and Alfieri, suddenly playing first and second violin, implored him "in the name of Italy" to accept an office "of such high importance that it stands above the individual Supreme Commands". Faced with so much insistence, Cadorna yielded, but only after receiving further assurances that he was indispensable to so exalted a function.

After only two months, however, Cadorna was recalled from Versailles and placed at the disposal of the Ministry of War so that he could be questioned by the Commission of Inquiry, "while naturally retaining rank and emoluments". This was the first ungrateful stage in the process by which the former Chief of the General Staff would be expelled from the army.

The question of rank and allowances made Cadorna suspicious, and he wrote to Orlando:

> From Your Excellency's telegram I learn that my rank and allowances will be preserved.
>
> By this insistence I am made to feel that a favour is being granted to me, which I cannot accept in any way.
>
> Moreover, I see no reason why I should receive wartime allowances when I possess no task beyond appearing before the Commission of Inquiry.
>
> I therefore request Your Excellency to have the decree amended...

What suspicions could the good General possibly harbour? Orlando replied. He appreciated the exquisite sentiment inspiring Cadorna's request, but the General must not fill his head with fancies.

By mid-July 1918, however, the fancies had become certainty. The "exceptional treatment granted him" had been "allowed on an extraordinary basis", but since the "highly special" situation had continued too many months, it was necessary, "also for reasons of public order", to regulate the "exceptional" position differently. On 1 July 1918 Cadorna, together with several colleagues, was therefore placed supernumerary at the disposal of the Ministry.

The measure aroused comment and uproar. Some confused it with degradation and shouted "traitor to the Fatherland" beneath his windows, believing he had been "convicted". The Commission's report was published in August 1919, and on 2 September General Cadorna was retired.

The responsibilities attributed to General Cadorna by the Commission of Inquiry were the following:

> He failed to govern the officer cadres properly, carrying out an excessive removal of senior officers and generals, frequently inspiring coercive measures that were inopportune and consequently disturbing the officers' minds without achieving the corresponding technical improvement that might justify the moral sacrifice. He failed properly to conserve the troops' physical and moral energies, particularly by tolerating unproductive sacrifices of blood and encouraging excessively frequent departures from regular military criminal procedure. Finally, he failed to give due importance to organic cohesion.
>
> He failed adequately to maintain organically constituted strategic reserves; to construct, coordinate and preserve certain defensive lines; to study in advance a possible retreat; to connect the Second Army with the Carnia zone; and to echelon stores and depots at an appropriate distance from the forward lines...

The immediately following years were not particularly happy for the old General. He used them to write works of considerable importance and respectable literary quality: La guerra alla fronte italiana, Altre pagine sulla guerra, the biography of his father Raffaele Cadorna, who had commanded the Italian army entering Rome in 1870, and Pagine polemiche, published posthumously in 1950.

His bitterness reached its lowest point when, in September 1921, the Ministry of War asked whether he had already received the War Cross for Military Merit and, if not, to state what period he had spent at the front "in a zone under enemy artillery fire". The merit cross with which Cadorna had rewarded thousands of soldiers and officers was finally bestowed upon him in November 1922 by the first Mussolini Government.

Mussolini was far from Cadorna's admirer. Concerned, however, by the popularity the General enjoyed with certain veterans' associations, which saw in him a symbol of the long and painful Calvary on the Isonzo front, Mussolini abruptly reversed course and on 4 November 1924 appointed him Marshal of Italy together with Armando Diaz, who had for months been at daggers drawn with Cadorna, from whom deep hostility divided him.

From then on Marshal of Italy Luigi Cadorna entered the ranks of unconscious extras surrounding the powerful figures of the rising regime. He had not been a flatterer before and was not one afterwards. The few speeches he delivered after his "apotheosis" ended with the somewhat old-fashioned invocation: Long live the King, long live Italy - forgetting or disregarding the Duce.

Fascism nevertheless used his name and attempted to draw towards his person sympathies that would later be appropriated by the regime.

Luigi Cadorna died on 21 December 1928 at the age of seventy-eight. He had savage detractors and equally passionate admirers. He was certainly not a fortunate general. On many occasions fate was more adverse than could be reconciled with average luck; few were the occasions upon which he obtained more than he deserved. A man of character whom destiny failed to convince.

Although General Cadorna was removed from command as soon as he had brought the army behind the Piave, General Capello did not, at least for the moment, suffer similar treatment. After returning to service following several weeks in hospital, he was entrusted with the Fifth Army, created anew to organise most of the Caporetto stragglers. From that tangled skein, ranks, arms and specialities had to be identified and extracted so that fighting formations might be rebuilt.

In March 1918 command was taken from him for the same reason Cadorna had been removed from his post as Italian representative upon the Inter-Allied Military Committee at Versailles: so that he might remain at the disposal of the recently established Commission of Inquiry.

Until August 1919 Capello fretted while awaiting the answer to his anxieties. The Commission's verdict, from which there was no appeal, struck him severely:

> General Capello is held responsible for having aggravated within the Second Army, through personal coercive methods sometimes reaching harassment, the effects of General Cadorna's governing criteria, and for having contributed to the troops' depression of spirit through excessive exploitation of physical and moral energy and a prodigality of blood disproportionate to the results.
>
> He failed to evaluate promptly the threat hanging over the extreme left wing of the Second Army. Through insufficiently sincere intellectual discipline, he failed to support the Supreme Command's defensive conception, particularly with regard to artillery deployment and provisions for counter-preparation fire. General Capello must nevertheless be credited with having conceived very well the function entrusted to VII Army Corps.

These accusations, some very general, condemned Capello while absolving commanders who were equally responsible and professionally more mediocre. They would have embittered characters more prudent and less superficial than that of the commander of the Second Army.

Capello hastened to protest to General Albricci, his former subordinate and Minister of War in Nitti's Cabinet. He defended himself in the book Per la verità and wrote two volumes of Note di guerra. The uproar he hoped to raise around his case did not occur. In 1919-20 the grief of war remained too recent for public opinion to respond favourably even in part to the complaints of the "butcher" General or be moved by the excess of injustice done to him.

He therefore looked around, filled with resentment towards the established order, and believed he had found refuge and rehabilitation among a band of dissatisfied men gathering under the title "Fascists" behind the name of Benito Mussolini.

He became a contributor to Il Popolo d'Italia and, during the March on Rome, assumed command of one of the Blackshirt columns that moved towards the capital on 28 October 1922. On 31 October General Capello marched among the squadristi parading beneath the balcony of the Ministry of War, dressed half as a general and half as a Fascist, with the broad Mauritian sash across his black shirt. "I do not conceal," Marcello Soleri wrote, "that he gave me the impression of a South American general."

Capello was a Freemason, however, and possessed the fault of being unwilling to deny his former companions when they came into conflict with his new ones. Mussolini's war against Freemasonry consequently saw him move to the opposite side of the barricade.

From neutrality he passed after the Matteotti murder into active opposition and began cultivating friendships exceedingly dangerous in those times: with the former Alpini major Tito Zaniboni, who had conceived the idea of killing Mussolini, and with Carlo Quaglia, who was instead a police informer.

On 4 November 1925, after Quaglia's denunciation, Tito Zaniboni was arrested in possession of a precision rifle inside a hotel room ninety metres from the balcony of Palazzo Chigi where Mussolini was expected to appear. He dragged General Capello down with him, although Capello was temporarily absent from the capital. The following day Il Popolo d'Italia published a tirade against the General, recalling that he was "the man of Caporetto for whom life is sacred to the point of murder".

After eighteen months of investigation came the trial, ending in Capello's sentence to thirty years' imprisonment for "complicity in insurrection [against the powers of the State] and attempted murder [of the Head of Government]". A Fascist militia NCO announced the verdict to the crowd outside the Special Tribunal for the Defence of the State with the words: "Justice has been done."

Capello received the number 3264, was given thieves and murderers as companions, and spent the tenth anniversary of the Bainsizza in solitary confinement. His name began disappearing from war histories; old friends and comrades abandoned him; his "former pupils" hastened to request and obtain his expulsion from the army; and his decorations and pension were withdrawn, the pension being transferred to his wife as though she were a widow.

In public places the word "Capello" was whispered inaudibly, and everyone fell silent in the presence of children for fear that innocent souls might reveal that forbidden conversations took place at home.

Marshal of Italy Luigi Cadorna was one of the few to show more than formal interest in the fate of his former collaborator. He wrote to General Cavallero, formerly head of the Operations Office at the Supreme Command, and received in reply a firm invitation to mind his own affairs, conveyed orally by a colonel for greater prudence.

Although the conviction remained in force, Capello was unexpectedly released in 1936. After so many years no one remembered him either as the victor of Gorizia and the Bainsizza or as the defeated commander of Caporetto. He was nearly eighty, with the astonished and dazzled gaze of a man who had not seen light for a long time.

The world awaiting him outside differed greatly from the one he had left. Trains ran punctually and new wars were being fought in Africa, this time victoriously. Everywhere were military uniforms, boys with rifles, and photographs and icons of the Man of Providence whom Capello had officially been convicted of attempting to kill.

That martial world appeared so beautiful that perhaps in his heart he was willing to forgive Mussolini for the years taken from him. When Italy entered the second great world war, Capello began waiting impatiently for the daily radio bulletin. Discussing strategy and tactics as he had twenty-five years earlier made him feel young again.

Before dying, however, he had the opportunity to realise that our military preparation rested, far more than in 1915, upon a house of cards. He died calmly and bitterly on 25 June 1941, after Hitler's armies had been advancing within the Soviet Union for seventy hours.

Because he had been dishonourably expelled, military representation was refused at his funeral and publication of the death notice in the newspapers was prohibited. The melancholy procession, unexpectedly brought forward by twenty-four hours on the tyrant's order to avoid nostalgic gatherings, passed desolately through an indifferent crowd concerned with entirely different matters.

The newspapers proclaimed: "THE GERMAN ARMY'S OFFENSIVE PROCEEDS IRRESISTIBLY. THOUSANDS OF RUSSIAN AIRCRAFT AND TANKS DESTROYED."

In October 1945 General Capello, who had rested in his grave for four years after eighty-four years of restless and unhappy life, was "amnestied" for the offence of attempting to attack the Head of Government and Duce of Fascism.

The future of lesser protagonists whose names were linked to the defeat at Caporetto was equally governed by chance. General Villani, who had promised at the head of his 19th Division to halt the enemy or die in place, committed suicide. General Farisoglio, commander of the 43rd Division, was captured. Bongiovanni and Cavaciocchi were relieved; the latter, believing - not without reason - that he had been unjustly struck, spent the remainder of his life collecting documents and testimony in defence of himself and his soldiers. His highly interesting book on the events of IV Army Corps at Caporetto remains unpublished.

Colonel Boccacci was promoted to general. General Badoglio was promoted all the way to Deputy Chief of the General Staff. This final climb, the most desired and welcome of all, was not achieved through shady manoeuvres but through an astonishing stroke of fortune in which the blind goddess was replaced by the Honourable Orlando and Bissolati, unaware that their choice would have consequences transcending the circumstances of the moment.

As commander of the army corps that had suffered the most fatal rupture, Badoglio did not expect to rise rather than fall. His appointment, together with that of General Giardino to stand beside the new Chief of the General Staff, was hastily decided at the beginning of November 1917, when nothing was yet known of the responsibilities connected with the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo.

It is therefore unsurprising that Badoglio resisted with all his strength the idea of destroying with his own hands what chance had served upon a silver platter. Summoned before the Commission of Inquiry - though not placed "at its disposal" like Cadorna and Capello - he attacked Cadorna in order to avoid defending himself, reproaching him for incorrect use of the reserves. Cadorna was astonished to hear such criticism from that pulpit.

As Cadorna himself states, he was "nauseated" by the "cowardice" of the accusers, whom the Commission named to him but whom he did not name, accusers who "did not hesitate to hurl the most unfounded charges at me". That the witness in question was Badoglio emerges from Malagodi's diary, in which Cadorna spoke as follows on 13 June 1918:

> ... The other day I was recalled because of several criticisms made against me by Badoglio.

> I had shown every consideration towards this man, who possessed good qualities as an army-corps commander; he owed his entire career to me, although it was deserved. And now he has turned against me.
>
> I should have nothing to reply to just and true statements, but his criticisms concerning the use of reserves and his reproach that I failed to hold the Tagliamento line are pure and simple nonsense founded upon complete ignorance of events.
>
> If Badoglio is in command today, he should thank me for saving the army by establishing it upon the Piave line. Yet this man attacks me to defend himself, because the disaster of Caporetto began in his corps, and he also behaved badly during the retreat, so that General Caviglia had to undertake the task of disentangling him.
>
> In any case I have answered the stupid criticisms point by point. These people attempt to stab me in the back but do not even know how to use the knife.

Badoglio's name was not implicated in the inquiry and did not appear among those the Commission presented to the nation as responsible for the defeat. Fifty years later the matter may appear insignificant, but for those who suffered the injustice so evident a demonstration that two weights and two measures were being applied caused indescribable pain.

After Giardino was removed from the Supreme Command, Badoglio remained sole Deputy Chief of the General Staff from February 1918. In that capacity he negotiated with the plenipotentiaries of the Austro-Hungarian army the Armistice of Villa Giusti, which brought our war to a victorious end.

His ascent continued thereafter: Chief of the Army General Staff in 1921, ambassador to Brazil from 1923 to 1925, governor of Libya from 1928 to 1933, and finally supreme commander in East Africa, where between November 1935 and May 1936 he brought to a happy conclusion a war certainly easier than the previous one, against an enemy unable to compare with the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Following victory, the Marquis of Sabotino also became Duke of Addis Ababa.

Those years witnessed an entire flowering of articles and publications about his person, compiled according to the technique later described by Orwell in 1984. In a widely circulated volume published in 1935, I Capi, le Armi, i Combattenti, written by a well-known senior officer, even the Volzana trap was transformed into a potential title of merit:

> ... Through force of circumstances, his troops were unable to put into practice the plan Badoglio had brilliantly conceived. Had the wings of fortune not at that moment been spread entirely in favour of the enemy, Badoglio would certainly have achieved the most brilliant victory.

It should be noted that in this book devoted to commanders Capello's name does not appear even once.

Yet these alterations are almost truth compared with those contained in more popular texts, in which history was rewritten completely until it became unrecognisable. Here is one example:

> During the Battle of the Bainsizza, Badoglio demolished the formidable enemy trenches one by one, facilitating the victory of our troops...

After this transformation, turning Badoglio into a Hercules-Maciste, came the description of Caporetto:

> He was subsequently transferred to XXVII Corps on the Lom positions, in a relatively quiet sector. On 24 October 1917 he clearly understood the danger but did not lose heart, and with calm firmness on 28 October courageously led several squadrons and groups of Arditi who were almost the last to abandon Udine.
>
> Fifteen days later he was appointed Deputy Chief of the General Staff by the wish of the Honourable

> Orlando himself, since his name had by then imposed itself upon the attention and admiration of those directing the nation's fate.

Always upon the crest of the wave and holding the highest rank in the military hierarchy as Chief of the General Staff - despite a version of Badoglio as sincerely "anti-Fascist" enjoying credit in certain circles - Pietro Badoglio found himself at sixty-nine directing the most complex war Italy had ever faced. He naturally misfired, to a degree greater than Italy deserved.

This nemesis of power appeared to end his career. But on 25 July 1943, when Mussolini was overthrown through a palace conspiracy, the man called to save Italy was Pietro Badoglio.

It was not even a very brief interlude. The Italians endured the fateful forty-five days from 25 July to 8 September, but Badoglio received many more. He remained Prime Minister - an experience he had not yet enjoyed - amid troubles and difficulties of every kind until the Allies captured Rome.

It was natural, moreover, that having failed to remove him from command in 1917 and indeed having promoted him, the Italians should find him underfoot again, demanding a place in history from a still higher position and at moments more dramatic than those of October 1917.

Marshal of Italy Pietro Badoglio died in 1956, leaving an odour of "semi-father of the Fatherland" which, once agreement is reached upon the extent of the qualification, may perhaps be granted him.

Half a century has passed since the end of the First World War, and it appears a millennium.

Today's world resembles very little the one existing before 1914. It is difficult to realise the relative degree of power and prosperity Europe then possessed compared with the remainder of the world, or how vertical the continent's decline has been since it permitted its finest energies to be mown down upon the battlefields.

Visiting those fields one by one, whether Flanders, Verdun or the Karst, one remains astonished and chilled by the immense war cemeteries containing the remains of the soldiers who fell in those distant battles. These infinite expanses of crosses, whose equal Western Europe does not know even when compared with the cemeteries of the Second World War, are a permanent monument to human madness and human courage.

So many lives extinguished in the flower of youth marked the generations that fought the First World War - dead and survivors alike - with an indelible stamp of youth. For that reason we cannot picture those men old and declining. Young they sacrificed themselves; young they will remain in the memory of posterity.

For Italy this legendary image is linked more than anything else to 1917: to the torrid Karst, the arid and blazing Bainsizza, the melancholy Chiapovano gorge immersed in shadow, and the sombre ravine of the Upper Isonzo.

The eye can still distinguish beneath the vegetation the old communication trenches, winding trenches, ruined military roads and hollow eyes of the caves. From time to time fragments of shells, cartridge clips, bayonets and human bones emerge here and there.

For a moment, closing one's eyes, the landscape comes alive with infantrymen in grey-green wearing jaunty helmets, camps, artillery, medical tents and moving lorries. The countryside fills and stirs; voices appear to emerge from behind ridges and valleys. Listening closely, one seems to hear the distant thunder of guns and the weakened cry of waves going into the assault. Then the panorama turns to stone in the slowly changing immobility of time.

These events can never occur again. They are prevented not by man's ever-latent madness but by the blinding glare of atomic deterrence. Yet anyone would be mistaken who believed that, with the book of individual warfare closed for ever and humanity suspended over the abyss of mass extermination, men would lack opportunities to display courage.

A COMMENT BY THE AUTHOR

In the summer of 1914 Europe was swept away by a gust of madness. At a distance of fifty years it seems permissible to state that, had the rulers of that time understood what the future held in store, they would have been very careful not to unleash the infernal forces that devastated Europe so thoroughly that the consequences are still suffered today.

Yet anyone attempting to describe that period still labours beneath the mortgage - or rather the blackmail - of the enormous sacrifice made in a not too distant past. Courage therefore fails when one must affirm that the sacrifice was sterile, indeed devastating, that the fallen died in vain and for unjust reasons.

The conspiracy of silence offers an easier modus vivendi. Younger generations know little about that period and are kept in a state of innocent ignorance, as though it were too grave to confess the truth to them and their minds too fragile to endure it.

In every country of the world schoolbooks, outlines and summaries still echo the false ideals of 1914, although even superficial criticism makes them appear grotesque. The truth is stated, naturally, but must be sought in weighty works which no one reads except specialists, who are by definition mithridatised. In any case, the truth is so diluted that distilling it becomes laborious alchemy.

In 1915 an equal madness blinded Italy. The interventionist camp was confined to two sectors possessing little influence upon the Italian people: the nationalist extreme Right and conservative Right, and the centre-left parties - Republicans, Radicals and Reformist Socialists.

The three largest parliamentary groups were neutralist: the liberal centre inspired by Giolitti, the Catholics and the Socialists. Unfortunately, many members of the first lacked an excess of civic courage. The Catholics were weakened by anticlerical feelings widespread among the Italian people, who were ready to see obscure papal manoeuvres for recovery of temporal power in every Catholic attitude. As for the Socialists, their opposition to war was justified through ideological and abstract reasons, so unconvincing and frequently so disagreeable that the very presence of Socialists in the neutralist camp drove a number of weak men into the opposite side merely to distinguish themselves.

Most of the nation therefore favoured neutrality. Yet the interventionist minority was neither small nor negligible, for an important part of so-called qualified public opinion favoured war. Under its pressure and encouraged by its support, Italy's rulers dared take the great step, assuming a responsibility certainly greater than that of the leaders surprised the previous summer.

Our lucky star had miraculously granted several months in which the experiences of others might have been studied. This invaluable advantage was squandered with incredible carelessness. Instead of critically analysing events beyond the frontiers, anxious eyes watched to see towards which side victory inclined, with the insane fear of arriving too late. Judgement was frequently forced by partisan desire and events twisted to support pre-existing convictions.

Italian intervention was given different purposes at different times, none convincing enough, as Marshal of Italy Enrico Caviglia wrote in 1930, to justify Italy's entry into the war.

It was said that participation in the conflict would "restore" Trento and Trieste. Apart from the fact that the Austrians would have given us Trento without bloodshed, it is difficult to believe that we could not have taken Trieste ourselves amid the chaos following the end of the war. There was, moreover, the distinguished precedent of Rome, annexed when the favourable opportunity arose - the temporary weakening of France, guardian of the temporal power of the Popes.

Alternatively, intervention served to demonstrate that it was untrue that Italians would not fight; Italians could indeed fight and die like every people on earth - like Germans, Frenchmen, Russians, Red Indians and African savages. In short, Italians were not the only cowardly people in the world.

A third tendency aspired through common sacrifice to consolidate the sacred union of all Italians, stretched towards the assertion of Rome's power, teacher of life as it had been two thousand years earlier. In a few words: "so that Italy may be great".

The bloody mud of the Karst trenches, Senator Ruffini wrote, was a miraculous cement that would for centuries transform our national building, erected too rapidly and easily, into a block of granite solidity. The Karst mud was a quick-setting cement for national unity, achieved with undeserved and shameless good fortune.

The emptiness of such propositions is well demonstrated by the possibility of reversing them and obtaining statements more closely corresponding to truth. As Giustino Fortunato said in 1921:

> [We have deceived ourselves too greatly] into believing we are much more and better than two thousand years of servitude have made us; that a people such as ours, although by good fortune it conquered freedom, cannot yet claim to have learned the art of using it well, since its original instincts and habits have remained almost unchanged.

The war was to represent the violent shock, the brick upon the head, used by ancient sorcerers to cure the mentally ill. Yet the sorcerers of 1915 attached little importance to the sacrifice of property that inevitably accompanied the sacrifice of lives.

In the First World War, more than in the Second, that sacrifice was vast and terrifying: equal to five years of Italy's national income at the time or, if preferred, to thirty years of capital investment.

A few simple considerations were sufficient to justify Italian neutrality in the world conflict. While there was no doubt that Italians would know how to fight once placed in a position to do so, it was equally true that Italy as a State lacked the capacity to sustain so immense a test.

Italy was a poor nation that had only recently begun accumulating the capital indispensable for industrial expansion. The Libyan War had already been a revealing error. The army emerged seriously disorganised and military stores emptied; by August 1914 they were far from replenished.

The comparison with the German Empire is symptomatic. Between 1870 and 1914 Germany had fought far fewer wars than the Kingdom of Italy. And had the Austro-Hungarian Empire perhaps gone in search of colonies? It may appear paradoxical, but is not, that had Italy spent upon armaments the wealth poured into the first African wars, she would have entered the world conflict far stronger and slightly less poor.

Intervention therefore benefited no one. It did not benefit the nationalists who dreamed of a virile and warlike Italy and discovered in 1919, after the loss of seven hundred thousand lives, that they had invoked the "hygiene of the world" in reverse.

It did not benefit industrialists, whom the end of the war surprised with a productive apparatus distorted and useless for the needs of peace - that is, permanent needs - and who had to settle accounts with a makeshift working class after its finest generations had been sent to be killed.

It did not benefit the lower middle class, which paid heavily in persons and property. Naturally, it benefited neither the working class nor the peasantry.

After half a century, what remains of the peace treaty is approximately South Tyrol. Had the equivalent of the war's cost been distributed to the new German-speaking Italian citizens, every family would have

become billionaires. At that price we could have purchased the world. There would have been no shortage of aspiring Italian citizens, only of money.

Anyone advancing such a paradoxical proposal would have been branded insane and confined to an asylum. Yet had the proposal been altered so that, rather than benefiting the unredeemed inhabitants, they were conquered by violence, adding seven hundred thousand dead and one and a half million wounded to the budget, the proposer would have been judged wise and patriotic.

It is painful to recognise all this: an immense and useless sacrifice undertaken in the name of irrational ideals that denied Italy's true interests. On this occasion Giovanni Giolitti alone clearly perceived the substantial reasons why Italy should remain outside the conflict.

His convictions were not shaken after the rout at Caporetto by the overbearing embrassons-nous which the interventionist minority imposed upon the former neutralist majority, not in the name of a superior and implored interest of the Fatherland but through an arrogant insistence that participation in the crusade against the Central Empires had been right.

After Caporetto, after the invasion of Friuli and Cadore, Italy finally acquired a false purpose capable of catalysing that sacred union - or almost sacred union - which no propaganda had previously succeeded in producing. Invaded and threatened in her integrity, the nation courageously proclaimed the will to survive.

The defensive thesis, according to which Italy had been forced to defend herself against aggression by the Central Empires rather than the reverse, proved so appetising that it was accepted and incorporated into popular tradition. For what purpose did Italy's soldiers march towards the frontier on 24 May 1915? "To form a barrier against the enemy."

A cohesion maintained through arguments so contrary to truth was condemned to dissolve as soon as the highly temporary pretexts creating it disappeared. This happened with lightning speed, to Italy's misfortune.

The Italian army's campaign during the spring, summer and autumn of 1917 rests upon the knife-edge of this balance. In one pan lie the interventionist motives of 1915; in the other, the false emotions produced by the rout at Caporetto and the Fatherland in danger.

It was a ferocious age, and one does not know whether to appreciate more the good fortune of not having lived through it or regret having missed the cruel emotions gripping the human spirit within the desert of barbed wire.

In 1917 half of Europe fought the other half with the drunken force of inertia. Like unsteady boxers, the two exhausted contestants, no longer capable of coherent thought, struck wildly.

The world war had therefore reached its supreme crisis. The Entente overcame it through American intervention, which despite Russia's defection finally permitted the defeat of the Central Empires.

The Tenth, Eleventh and Twelfth Battles of the Isonzo were ferocious battles: the first a bloody reverse; the second a modest success which, experts say, might have produced but did not produce a great victory; the third a spectacular defeat.

They belonged to the series of twelve battles that bloodied the Julian front from the day of our intervention until 27 October 1917. They differed from the preceding battles in the greater violence of the effort, the unprecedented number of men and means involved, and the return of mobile warfare to the Western fronts after three years, a warning and precursor of the Blitz that would develop so fully during the Second World War.

We were the first to suffer a new form of attack. Since we failed to seek the correct explanation, we did not even notice it.

It was therefore impossible to draw from these events, tragic in development and conclusion, whatever usefulness negative experience can supply. Yet drawing a lesson from the history of one's own country appears a privilege denied to an Italian, and we must turn to Denis Mack Smith, who as an Englishman does not fear being placed upon the index.

From this viewpoint Caporetto, its origins and its initial development are exemplary. The Commission of Inquiry attempted to present a picture of every fact except one: the conduct of XXVII Army Corps and its commander. Thus mutilated, the report was incomplete and unjustly partisan.

To avoid further troubles - more dangerous, it was said during the First World War, than shells - the Historical Office of the General Staff carefully avoided touching the subject of Caporetto. This is less astonishing than the perpetual confidence, regularly disappointed, of each generation of Italians in a future better than the past.

Ugo Ojetti wrote in July 1919:

> Concerning what happened in Italy [during the war], American technicians and students of military art have never been able to obtain a single printed book or pamphlet.
>
> The Historical Office of the General Staff, for example, finished publishing the history of the 1866 war in 1908.
>
> Forty-three years. No. The silence of these five years, compared with the noisy and skilful loquacity of others, has already harmed us too much. Were it to continue, I do not say for another forty-three years but merely for several more months, it would be suicide - and moreover stupid like every suicide.

When Ojetti wrote these statements, he was not a young and inexperienced man but a mature gentleman approaching fifty, an age generally reached after stripping oneself of adolescent illusions.

The childish force of his illusion is measured by the fact that not several months and not forty-three years, but forty-eight years after the events described, official Italy still remained silent [42], perhaps waiting until even the centenarian witnesses disappeared into the grave.

If this system of avoiding trouble were applied only to the Battle of Caporetto, which after all interests a restricted group of maniacs, patience might be possible. Unfortunately it is a rule of life on many occasions for both official and private Italy.

After the war, the events of 1917 were related with the same love of truth shown during the war when news about the enemy was provided. It is regrettable, for example, that our most celebrated bulletin, the final one, begins with two acknowledged falsehoods:

> The war against Austria-Hungary, which under the supreme guidance of His Majesty the King - Supreme Commander - the Italian Army, inferior in numbers and means, began on 24 May 1915 and conducted without interruption and with unshakable faith and tenacious courage for forty-one exceedingly bitter months, has been won...

The King never directed the war, and except for a brief period after 24 October 1917 the Italian army was never inferior in numbers and means to the Austrian army deployed against us. Had the truth been openly recognised, the desire for investigation might perhaps have been stimulated.

Many publications issued between 1919 and 1939 continued to relate the sequence of events as propaganda and carelessness allowed it to be presented. For many French writers the Tenth and

Eleventh Battles of the Isonzo never occurred. According to General Mangin, the famous commander of the Black Army, the Italian front remained relatively "quiet" after June 1917 until Caporetto.

These inaccuracies have been transferred wholesale into many recently published survey works, suggesting that the original falsehoods or inaccuracies will continue for centuries.

Jacques Chastenet wrote in 1957 that:

> on the Eastern Front and the Karst, the consequences of the Russian Revolution paralysed the great offensive planned by the Allies.

According to Pierre Renouvin, writing in 1962:

> [the Franco-British armies] alone bore the weight of the battle [in April 1917].

As for Caporetto:

> Losses in dead amounted to barely ten thousand men. Mass desertions... measure the scale of this moral crisis.

On the Italian side there was equal crudity. Even Colonel Gatti, an honest and intelligent man, wondered in his diary under 8 August 1917 what our fighting meant while "no one is fighting", as though the Battle of Flanders were not under way. Everyone plainly thought only of his own front and learned nothing about the others.

In 1932 General Mario Caracciolo compared the one hundred thousand men lost by the French in the Nivelle offensive - in reality the number was much higher - with the 157,000 lost by us in the battle of May 1917, in order to argue that:

> those losses made so great an impression in France that they induced her to cease the offensives to which she had nevertheless committed herself with the Allies,

forgetting to explain that the French losses were the tail end of four million, while ours had barely exceeded one million.

The limit was reached by Colonel Varo Varanini. According to him, writing in 1935:

> In France, after the unsuccessful Nivelle offensive, which cost the Franco-British barely 133,000 men, our Allies remained almost inactive throughout 1917.

Yet on the Western Front the losses of 1917 amounted to one and a half million men on the Allied side and nine hundred thousand on the German side.

With these falsehoods, European propaganda after the First World War prepared the second conflict.

Having said of the war and of our intervention all the evil they deserve, it is appropriate to devote a few words to the military operations of 1917. It is said that these operations, and those preceding them, suffered greatly from disagreement between the Army Supreme Command and the political authority, responsibility usually attributed to General Cadorna, popularly regarded as surly and intolerant.

In reality Cadorna served as the scapegoat for many responsibilities that were insidiously left to him although they did not belong to him, or which he silently assumed.

Cadorna's intractability provided a convenient alibi for our rulers. They believed their duty completed when they declared war, after which they would go on holiday for several months while waiting for the Italian army to join the Russians at Budapest and the Serbo-Montenegrins in Bosnia. Only then would diplomacy pick up the threads of the game temporarily interrupted.

Had Cadorna, instead of possessing the difficult character he did, dutifully consulted the Government to be enlightened upon the finest political colouring to give his military operations, Salandra or Boselli could probably have offered only an embarrassed answer: do as you think best. They might even have begged him to stop the senseless massacres, as Orlando did.

Yet the war itself was senseless, and ours no more so than that of the others. Once inside it, everyone was carried away by the force of its paranoid logic.

It must be added that our military errors were no worse than those committed by the French, British and, why not, the Americans. Compared with figures such as Joffre and Douglas Haig, General Cadorna and even Capello appear tender-hearted.

Our war tactics were insane in absolute terms but not in relative terms. It is pure legend - for which we ourselves bear partial responsibility - that our combat losses were exceptionally high and our commanders greater butchers than the others. If anything, they were slightly less so.

Losses in dead, wounded and missing suffered by the Italians, French and British during the first nine months of 1917, a period in which all three armies held the operational initiative, were as follows:

Italians: 450,000
French: 460,000
British: 590,000

If the comparison is limited to the Italian army and the British army deployed upon the Western Front, which were equal in numerical strength, British losses prove thirty per cent greater than ours and were distributed almost uniformly from April to November, unlike Italian losses concentrated around two great battles.

The British war in 1917 was therefore a kind of enormous San Gabriele which, instead of lasting a fortnight, continued for eight months. The conduct of the Battle of Flanders reveals a General Staff worse than our own.

The fanciful conclusions drawn from the false premise that Italian losses were exceptionally bloody in relative terms therefore collapse. It is also useless to seek a class-based explanation for the immense waste of men perpetrated on the Italian front in 1915-18, maintaining that so great a hecatomb was a manifestation of the predatory capitalism then dominant in Italy and of the small concern shown by peacetime employers and wartime generals for an abundant and unskilled labour force.

If these criteria were accepted, the nation most wasteful of men would be France, closely followed by Britain, while the most economical would be Germany, which succeeded in inflicting almost twice as many losses upon her enemies as she suffered.

The truth is that the levelling mentality characteristic of First World War General Staffs - and of the Soviet and Japanese General Staffs during the Second World War - flourished especially within the Entente. For inexplicable reasons, the Entente fought by elevating contempt for the individual into a symbol of martial vigour and treating human masses as immense herds of identical beings without feelings.

The conception of war which in Italy is called Cadorna's, according to a tradition not entirely justified, was merely a pale reflection of that of Joffre and Douglas Haig.

Discussion of Cadorna's figure will continue. He made too many decisions for a significant proportion not to be wrong. Yet observed closely, he is a man who inspires respect. The crystalline clarity and pleasant, varied style of his writings would deserve a less forgotten place in Italian literature.

One senses in him, and in Angelo Gatti's fascinating descriptions, a personality of profound culture and powerful emotions. Although many of his words or forecasts can be cited as far from accurate, it should not be forgotten that the mistakes of other and more fortunate famous figures were softened by success.

It is said, for example, that at the time of Caporetto Cadorna displayed little sensitivity to events in Russia. The truth is that he was always hypersensitive to what occurred along Austria's Eastern Front. In September 1917, before any commander in the field and on the basis solely of Russian events rather than clear evidence of an enemy offensive, he assumed the defensive.

The strategic surprise at Caporetto resulted in part from Cadorna's overestimation of the Russian Revolution's effect upon enemy deployment. He apparently considered only two hypotheses: either no offensive, or an overwhelming offensive intended to put the Italian army permanently out of action.

The latter hypothesis, outlined at the inter-Allied conference in Paris in July 1917, assumed the arrival upon our front of ten divisions a month for many months, not ten divisions in a single month and for one month only, as actually occurred.

Cadorna tended to attribute to the enemy the most logical move, excluding the possibility that he would attack half-heartedly with mediocre forces and mediocre objectives such as the Torre and Tagliamento.

He therefore repeated the error of 1916, when he disbelieved a possible Austrian offensive from Trentino because, strictly speaking, the Austrians should instead have been concerned by the Russian threat which materialised in Brusilov's offensive and placed the Austrian Eastern Front in extreme danger.

The limited scale of the enemy preparations upon the Upper Isonzo - although exceedingly intense in relation to the brief period of concentration - left him to the end doubtful of their true meaning, while also giving him excessive confidence in the possibility of containing them through ordinary measures.

It is certainly no justification for Cadorna that, in hindsight - as Marshal Conrad had thought beforehand - a decisive move against Italy would have been far more profitable for the Central Empires than a half-victory whose risks exceeded its advantages.

History is filled with parallel examples demonstrating how grave it is to attribute the best logic to the enemy. The German Ardennes offensive of December 1944 may stand for all. Anglo-American commanders excluded it absolutely, precisely on the basis of what Germany should or should not find advantageous. Hitler made the move least advantageous to him and almost succeeded in breaking through towards the Meuse.

In many respects the Ardennes offensive can be compared with Caporetto. There too were exaggerated confidence and reckless security - indeed arrogance - among the Allied commands; an extended and lightly defended front; sparse and misleading intelligence, far more misleading than at Caporetto; a commander, Eisenhower, beside whom Cadorna does not appear inferior; a German attack by élite troops nevertheless launched recklessly with insufficient means to sustain a prolonged effort; an attacking command bold to the point of imprudence; and a ruthless, unconventional method of attack.

The premises of the Battle of the Bulge were therefore very similar to those of Caporetto. As at Caporetto, there were panic and flight, and the Americans lost thirty thousand prisoners in two days.

During the battle, however, the American soldier's best individual qualities could be exploited. These depended less upon personal courage than upon a high civic consciousness, fostered by profound and heartfelt education and by the sense of being not a blind instrument of an incompetent oligarchy but a living part of a community conscious of its duties.

For this reason the American defeat did not become a rout; for this reason, in part, the defeat at Caporetto became flight.

In October 1917 Cadorna's sceptical attitude nevertheless had far smaller consequences than the errors of his subordinates, who transformed what might have been a modest reverse into a spectacular defeat. Ignorant of the facts and acting in good faith - but also moved by resentment towards a Government he believed he had caught at fault - Cadorna blamed the innocent troops.

Other things must also be remembered about Cadorna: he never lost his head; he reasoned, in his own way, in every circumstance; and he placed trust in subordinates. The latter is reproached as a defect, but may be regarded as a virtue in which Italy's ruling class does not excel.

The First World War was a drama that left traces in Italian literature deserving to be less unknown than they are. Many young people have read All Quiet on the Western Front, but how many have read Carlo Salsa's Trincee? Yet for an Italian, Trincee possesses far greater validity than Remarque's novel.

And what of Attilio Frescura's Diario di un imboscato, Arturo Stanghellini's Introduzione alla vita mediocre, Luigi Bartolini's Ritorno sul Carso, Arturo Rossato's L'elmo di Scipio, the delightful Kobilek and the dramatic La ritirata del Friuli by Ardengo Soffici? And Comisso, Lussu, Gasparotto, Ojetti, Muccini, Locchi and Prezzolini?

Works of artistic value are not lacking even in professional military literature: all of Cadorna, all of Caviglia, the works of Baj-Macario, not to mention Angelo Gatti, who left unforgettable pages whether read from the historical and professional viewpoint or the human one.

These are only a few among many names unjustly erased from the everyday culture of contemporary Italy.

A French writer summarised in a few words the principal feeling aroused by recollection of the First World War: "I hate war, but I love those who fought it." Yet this affection and love projected towards a heroic past must not lead to indulgence towards the causes that threw Italy into the conflict and might still today, in very different circumstances and situations, operate in the same direction and manner.

It is not flattering to recognise that many distortions of that time remain distortions today. Against them only one defensive weapon exists: the education of the Italian people. To anyone maintaining that this is one problem among many, I answer that it is the only problem.

LIST OF PRINCIPAL QUOTATIONS

SPECIAL NOTE TO CHAPTERS I ("ISONZO 1917") AND VII ("CAPORETTO")

Chapter I contains three stories that are more or less fictional. The first two echo childhood memories of occasions when I listened to men who had "fought" the Great War and continued recalling it. The final episode is a free elaboration of what Giovanni Comisso related in his celebrated book Giorni di guerra, also used in Chapter VII.

Chapter VII is not intended as a description of the Battle of Caporetto. Readers seeking details will find them diligently collected by A. Monticone, who not only completed the latest study of the battle in chronological order but also produced by far the most accurate work.

Chapter VII of this book is instead conceived as an episodic narrative of the opening hours of the great battle - the greatest ever fought on Italian soil - as seen by those who were present and left a record, such as Comisso and Frescura, or who were able to collect testimony from participants, such as Cesco Tomaselli. Every episode has nevertheless been placed within a comprehensible account of military events through the use of other sources.

In order, the principal sources for the fourteen episodes narrated in Chapter VII are: episode 1 (A. Garaventa); episode 2 (G. Comisso); episode 3 (A. Frescura); episode 4 (M. Muccini); episode 5 (C. Tomaselli); episode 6 (L. Capello 2); episode 7 (C. Tomaselli); episode 8 (G. Bini Cima); episode 9 (V. Vailati and L. Capello 2); episode 10 (G. Sironi); episode 11 (F. Troiani); episode 12 (E. Caviglia); episode 13 (L. Capello 1 and 2 and A. Soffici 2); episode 14 (L. Cadorna 1 and A. Gatti 5).

CHAPTER II

“Having seen the baggy…” — Lacerba, year III (1915), no. 20, 15 May.

Croce's judgements on D'Annunzio are found in La Critica, XIII, May 1915, p. 320.

“The speed with which Italy…” — C. d. S., 4 January 1917.

“During the years of my corruption…” — L. Cortese.

Advertising for the products mentioned is taken from newspapers and magazines of the period.

The plots of several films mentioned are described in many daily newspapers.

“In a few large cities…” — C. Falls.

CHAPTER III

“But I shall secretly give orders…” — Deduced from what Cadorna told Malagodi on 23 January 1917. O. Malagodi.

“You understand…” — O. Malagodi.

“Head or torso…” — D. d. C., 29 April-6 May 1917.

“21 December 1916…” — A. Frescura.

“I, although my class…” — A. Frescura.

“In the spring of 1917…” — E. Caviglia 2.

“The soldier has formed the curious conviction…” — L. Gasparotto.

“A continuous movement…” — A. Gatti 2.

“I received a painful impression…” — Report of VI Army Corps to Second Army Command, reproduced in L. Capello 1.

“An endless procession…” — C. Salsa.

“A second lieutenant passed…” — A. Frescura.

“Along that stretch of road…” — M. Quaglia.

“The curious recoveries…” — D. d. C., 11-18 March 1917.

“Prolonged life in the trench…” — Reproduced in L. Capello 1.

“The assault! The assault…” — L. Gasparotto.

“Towards the end of August 1916…” — L. Capello 2.

“It is evident that…” and “Those who maintained…” — L. Capello 2.

“Timetables are never observed…” — C. Falls.

“Another wounded man arrives…” — C. Salsa.

“A type has been invented…” — C. Caravaglios.

“When a shell explodes…” — C. Caravaglios.

“It has been said…” — D. Lloyd George.

“Whoever allows himself to be taken prisoner…” — C. d. S., 10 June 1917.

“At sick parade…” — M. Muccini.

“In the courtyard there is an ambulance wagon…” — C. Salsa.

“They sent me no commendation…” — L. Capello 1.

“The act for which I removed him…” — A. Gatti 4.

“Ten soldiers, almost all conscripts…” — From I racconti di un fantaccino by G. Bechi, reproduced in G. Sciortino.

“Easter. At the nearby village…” — A. Frescura.

“We have had to create…” — O. Malagodi.

“In almost all the writings…” — V. Lentini.

“Great cordiality, great surprise…” — C. Salsa.

“One seems to be witnessing…” — S. Slataper.

“I Army Corps Command. 3318…” — Cited in L. Cadorna 3.

“Everyone felt the charm…” — V. Varanini.

“The man who with his heart…” — C. Cignozzi.

“If you could see what it is like…” — V. Varanini.

“A true gentleman…” — A. Gatti 4.

“During the operations of May 1917…” — A. Gatti 4.

“Since the Commission…” — L. Cadorna 3.

“I approved that, in the units…” — Cited from Avanti!, 10 August 1919. Caviglia's judgements on the Duke of Aosta are taken from E. Caviglia 4.

“A certain instinctive distrust…” — L. Albertini.

“Let the men rest…” — Second Army Circular 5566, dated 2 October 1917, reproduced in L. Capello 1.

“As soon as he began to display…” — A. Gatti 4.

“When, in the question of the defence…” — V. Varanini 3.

“Between Genoa and Sampierdarena…” — Words of G. Giolitti to O. Malagodi.

“From my contacts with him…” — O. Malagodi.

“After the disaster…” — W. Steed.

“He was a man of strong will…” — E. Caviglia 4.

“We are not fundamentally antipathetic…” — A. Gatti 4.

“One tenth of the mental effort…” — W. Churchill.

“For this reason…” — V. E. Orlando.

“I gathered impressions…” — O. Malagodi.

CHAPTER IV

“The star of Italy…” — Countess Aurelia.

“Hoetzendorff is satisfied…” — G. von Müller.

“[Russia], as she was about to seize…” — W. Churchill.
“He develops this opinion…” — M. Paléologue.
Quoted expressions attributed to General Wilson come from his diary. H. Wilson.
Quotations concerning Russian events come from daily newspapers of the period.
“[The] great Italian…” — A. Sodini.
“We must save Italy…” — H. Wilson.
“A cataract of attack, manoeuvre, offensive…” — A. Lumbroso 3.
“To cultivate that discipline…” — A. Frescura.
“In general it is not believed…” — N. Brancaccio.
“The fire carried out…” — L. Capello 2.
“For months and months…” — C. d. S., 17 May 1917.
“But the enemy knew…” — C. d. S., 17 May 1917.
“Dark and damp as a mine…” — L. Ambrosini in La Stampa, 18 May 1917.
“An exceedingly hard task…” — G. Baj-Macario.
“Rigid faces blackened by smoke…” — C. d. S., 17 May 1917.
“Hidden among the rocks…” — A. Baldini.
“I myself saw from Sabotino…” — L. Capello 2.
“Sometimes from afar…” — E. Caviglia 1.
“When we had already reached…” — M. Soleri.
“I am resigned to everything…” — C. Caravaglios.
“The divisional commander - the iron General Gonzaga…” — G. Baj-Macario.
“Our men lingered…” — L. Capello 2.
“An artillery general…” — O. Malagodi.
“At this moment the infantry…” — L. Gasparotto.
“By night and day…” — G. M. Trevelyan.
“During the following days…” — L. Cadorna 1.
“The enemy… has made of…” — C. d. S., 25 May 1917.
“It rose towards noon…” — La Stampa, 26 May 1917.
“Out, lads!” — C. Salsa.
“At Udine there was no…” — A. Stanghellini.
“On the 22nd an arduous test…” — U. S. 2.
“Few wounded men pass…” — A. Frescura.
“First among the first…” — A. Albertazzi.
“Who are you?” — L. Gasparotto.
“The Timavo!” — L. Gasparotto.
“At two in the afternoon…” — L. Gasparotto.
“He always answered destiny” and the following passages — C. d. S., 7 June 1917.
“They came down behind me in this way…” — A. Calori.
“Now I shall tell you something…” — G. von Müller.
“From Plava to the Vipacco…” — C. d. S., 1 June 1917.
“At Petrograd the news…” — C. d. S., 31 May 1917.
“The May-June 1917 offensive…” — V. E. Orlando.
“I feel life within me demanding…” — M. De Benedetti.
“After an enemy bombardment…” — C. d. S., 22 June 1917.
“I rushed…” — V. Lentini.
“Groups form among the huts…” — C. Salsa.

“The Government tolerates…” — O. Malagodi.

CHAPTER V

“Events now prove correct…” — L. Cadorna.

“There is trouble…” — Cited in L. Wolff.

“At the meeting of 26 July…” — J. J. Pershing.

“By this date the Italian army…” — U. S. 3.

“He waved before their eyes…” — D. Lloyd George.

Robertson's letter to Cadorna is reproduced in U. S. 3.

“That recently, in several quarters…” — U. S. 3.

“Everyone talks about the Russian Revolution…” — M. Muccini.

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“You have been called…” — C. d. S., 12 August 1917.

“But one must place oneself…” — V. E. Orlando.

“The eyes of Pinerolo's riflemen…” — G. Abate.

“Grenadiers of Tuscany!” and subsequent quotations from the Duke's speeches are reproduced in Emanuele Filiberto. The first version concerning the torrent and so forth is in A. Frescura.

“Military life…” — G. M. Trevelyan.

“20 August…” — M. Astuto.

“The assault units…” — G. Svanoni.

“They have white corneas…” — F. T. Marinetti's preface to G. Svanoni.

“The dregs found everywhere…” — G. Giardino 2.

“They said we were criminals…” — P. Giudici.

Quoted passages are taken from operational orders reproduced in U. S. 3.

“It is you, O soldiers…” — G. Pestelli.

“The orders that the action be carried through…” — A. Frescura.

“The great boats descended…” — E. Caviglia 1.

“Even today it is inexplicable…” — I. Flores.

“It also appears, from what I have gathered…” — G. Baj-Macario.

“From Tolmino to the sea…” — C. d. S., 21 August 1917.

“From the direction of Rodez…” — A. Soffici 1.

“If the Italians…” — G. Baj-Macario.

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“Certainly it was necessary to possess…” — E. Caviglia 1.

“Despite his impatience…” — E. Caviglia 1.

“At that time I was convinced…” — E. Caviglia 1.

“For several hours there was shouting…” and the next two quotations — A. Soffici 1.

“In those troglodyte caves…” — C. Romano.

“Climbed to the north…” — C. d. S., 30 August 1917.

“Let [them] be advanced…” — U. S. 3.

“On 27 August…” — G. Baj-Macario.

“I implore Your Lordship…” — U. S. 3.

“The diary bears witness…” — L. Albertini.

“I was almost dead from exhaustion…” and “I saw a magnificent spectacle…” — A. Soffici 1.

“During those days…” — Anonymous Lieutenant.

“The new commander…”, “At dawn Le Roccette…” and “Great skeins of smoke…” — M. Muccini.

“It concentrated fire upon our works…” and “Taken as a whole…” — U. S. 3.
“The incendiary shells…” — Regime Fascista, 24 November 1933.
“I stop at the low wall…” — A. Beccaria.
“Brigadier Perris…” — A. Stanghellini.
“The enemy pounds…” — G. Cavazzana.
“Point 100! It was all a cemetery…” — G. D. Bernardoni.
“Breaths of wind…” — M. De Benedetti.
“I am valuable because I am strong…” and “The most delightful burial…” — A. Baldini.
“It illuminated wire…” — A. Calori.
“It is all one nest of machine guns…” — C. d. S., 21 August 1917.
“Exceedingly violent artillery fire…” — U. S. 3.
“On the Karst the struggle rages…” — C. d. S., 23 August 1917.
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“The infantry, having sprung forward…” — C. d. S., 24 August 1917.
“They went five times into the assault…” — A. Stanghellini.
“19 August… The sun beats down…” — G. Russo.
“The bombardment of the first line…” — C. d. S., 24 August 1917.
“The gallant Colonel Pedrocchi…” — L. Gasparotto.
“I glance out…” — F. Weber.
“Every night there arrive…” — F. Weber.
“The Italians attacked…” — Official Austrian report cited in U. S. 3.
“They all conducted their actions…” — E. Caviglia 4.
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“These incomplete maps leave one perplexed…” — G. Bini Cima.
“The order to attack arrived…” — G. Bini Cima.
“A most agreeable cavalry captain…” — A. Frescura.
“We are not immortal…” — L. De Regibus.
“Unfortunately the supporting formations…” — L. Capello 2.
“Now the Arditi…” — G. Corsaro.
“This year they fought…” — G. Sironi.
“Divisional headquarters…” — L. Capello 1.
“We have lost the summit…” — U. Ojetti.
“Foch came to see me…” — H. Wilson.
“Few battles have possessed the harshness…” — C. d. S., 8 September 1917.
“During the last ten days…” — G. M. Trevelyan.
“Those who visited the front…” — L. Albertini.
“What you say about Capello…” — U. Ojetti.
“[Our officer cadres] have suffered greatly…” — O. Malagodi.
“The Austrians were being hurled…” — C. d. S., 6 September 1917.
“The sky is dark…”, “The interception station…” and “Another conversation intercepted…” — L. Gasparotto.
“Amid the whistling of projectiles…” — I. Flores.

CHAPTER VI

“An operation of far greater importance…” — E. Ludendorff.
“I therefore ask you, dear…” — A. Bollati.
The correspondence between Cadorna and the Allied chiefs is published in U. S. 3.

“With regard to the condition of the army…” — Photographic reproduction in V. Varanini.

“I began my speech…” — V. E. Orlando.

“At the Council of Ministers…” — L. Cadorna 3.

“The transport of artillery…”, “What solution should be adopted…”, “It has been learned…” and “It is necessary to examine…” — L. Capello 2.

“Ah yes, it would be much easier…” — L. Cadorna 3.

“The tenor of those words…” — L. Cadorna 3.

“It should not be excluded…” — R. C. I.

“Despite the numerous rumours…” — R. C. I.

“From information supplied by prisoners…” — L. Capello 2.

“The officers surrounding…” — A. Gatti 2.

“The news from Russia…” — L. Albertini.

“The Russians, with Riga lost…” — G. Castellini 2.

“We have our cards…” — O. Malagodi.

“[Our army] was redeeming…” — The unpublished article is found in B. Croce.

“Among the popular classes…” — O. Malagodi.

“We demand that within the shortest time…” — G. Dal Bianco.

“There are generals…” — L. Gasparotto.

“Modern war is science…” — M. Fiore.

“Did you see what…” — I. Flores.

“This morning I was called to assist…” — D. C. Bonini.

“It must not be forgotten…” and “It is necessary, as I have repeated…” — L. Capello 2.

“The commander's conception…” — L. Capello 2.

“I could not fail to approve…” — L. Cadorna 3.

“Signs of enemy activity…” — O. Marchetti.

“The advanced season…” — C. Pettorelli Lalatta.

“The vague but consistent reports…”, “The enemy's maximum programme…”, “If the inevitable delay…” and “The troops are to be accustomed…” — L. Capello 2.

“To practise the new employment…” — F. Troiani.

See the complete text, for example, in L. Cadorna 3.

“The few siege batteries…” — L. Capello 2.

“From what I personally observed…” — Cited by Laura Capello.

“Executive orders…” — L. Capello 1.

“It was necessary to take advantage…” — L. Capello 2.

“Since during the past few days…” — R. C. I.

“[Capello] held those conferences…” — E. Caviglia 2.

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“If attacked, Your Excellency…” — Cited, for example, in L. Cadorna 3.

Capello's conferences of 17-18 October are reproduced, for example, in L. Capello 2.

“Your Excellency's design…” — Reproduced, for example, in L. Cadorna 3.

“As a result of the progressive deterioration…” — A. Gatti 1.

“The Army Corps possessed no…” and following text — L. Cadorna 1.

“For what reason would the Supreme Command…” — L. Cadorna 3.

“The enemy offensive was expected…” — L. Cadorna 1.

“The attack is discussed a little…” — G. Semeria.

“I left with the hope…” — L. Capello 1.

“The truth is this…” — L. Cadorna 3.
“Napoli Brigade passes to the disposal…” — See the text, for example, in L. Capello 2.
“Bongiovanni told me…” — E. Caviglia 4.
“In the worst case that the enemy…” — E. Caviglia 2.
“And I repeat once again…” — L. Capello 2.
“When, on the Caporetto road…” — M. Muccini.
“The headquarters continue…” — M. Muccini.
“The Chief of Staff…” — A. Frescura.
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“The commander of the Second Army…” — E. Caviglia 2.
“His Excellency Badoglio, who knows…” — L. Capello 2.
“The troops must be prepared…” — V. Vailati.
“There has been much discussion of a trap…” — E. Caviglia 2.
“But the report is another matter…” — C. d. S., 8 September 1919.
“The order… was suggested to me…” — L. Cadorna 3.
“The army-corps commander…” — R. C. I.
“This provision…” — E. Caviglia 2.
“The manoeuvre conception…” — L. Capello 1.
“[The breakthrough zones] are to be engaged…” and “As soon as [fire] begins…” — L. Capello 2.
“It now appears almost certain…” — N. Papafava.
“To launch the attack…” and “There emerges the necessity…” — L. Capello 2.
“It is easy to issue an order…” — V. Vailati.
“On the British front…” and “It appears the enemy will unleash…” — L. Capello 2.
“Bear in mind that the cloud…” and “Fog and fine drizzle…” — Supreme Command.
“When the Austrians trouble us…” and “The Alpini began…” — C. Salsa.

CHAPTER VII

“To withdraw towards the Prevala saddle…” — A. Garaventa.
“In large, strongly constructed shelters…” — F. Weber.
“I find it extremely difficult…” — L. Albertini.
“[The Italians] lost…” — L. Albertini.
“I saw a great crowd advancing along the road…” — G. Comisso.
“Running through the downpour…” — A. Frescura.
“Back, everyone…” — A. Frescura.
“At Staroselo an attempt was made to organise…” — L. Capello.
“We fall back as far as Staroselo…” — A. Frescura.
“They say that there appeared…” and “The telephone lines are broken…” — M. Muccini.
“An Austrian of Italian race…” — G. Sironi.
“Not one artillery round…” — R. C. I.
“They are already above the 7th…” — M. Muccini.
“A group of survivors…” — I. Flores.
“From the direction of Idersko…” and “I remain alone with Benvenuto…” — M. Muccini.
“Night descends…” — C. Tomaselli.
“Proceed with the troops of Spika…” — L. Capello 2.
“The most absolute silence…” — R. C. I.
“The support of our artillery…” — L. Capello 2.

“The action of our artillery…” — R. C. I.

“After offering resistance…” — L. Capello 2. The final sentence, “The commanders and troops did their duty to the last,” is not reproduced by L. Capello but by V. Vailati.

“At midnight I awake…”, “We cross the road…” and “The Commands and commissions…” — G. Bini Cima.

“Please send information…” and “No means of communication…” — C. Geloso.

“Situation on the right bank of the Isonzo…” — L. Capello 2.

“I place at the disposal…”, “It later had to be denied…”, “Puglie Brigade headquarters…” and “An officer from my headquarters…” — L. Capello 2.

“My men crouch…”, “We are surrounded…”, “At this moment one of our batteries…” and “The soldiers, so long as they remained in the hands…” — G. Sironi.

“They wear enormous helmets…” — F. Troiani.

“As soon as they reached the ridges…” — E. Viganò.

“The 62nd Division reports…” — L. Capello 2.

“The troops are to be persuaded…” — E. Viganò.

“It is now established that the detachments…” — L. Capello 2.

“To expect soldiers…” — O. Zoppi in Il Resto del Carlino, 27 January 1933, cited by L. Dal Bianco.

“Because simultaneity was lacking…” — E. Caviglia 2.

“At that moment the commander…” — E. Caviglia 2.

“The rain had stopped…”, “Our men still resist…”, and “Going home for a moment…” — A. Soffici 2.

“Before dawn that brigade…” — L. Capello 2.

“During the drive…” — A. Soffici 2.

“I was seized by vomiting…” — L. Capello 2.

“At headquarters I found…” — A. Soffici 2.

“A livid atmosphere of tragedy…” — L. Capello 2.

“A further change in command today…” — L. Capello 1.

“This state of mind…” — E. Caviglia 2.

“The enemy offensive has resumed…” — Published, for example, in A. Cabiati 1.

“It is a thunderbolt…” — A. Gatti.

“The Kaiser was ‘exultant’...” — G. von Müller.

“Fortunately the trees...” — W. Churchill.

CHAPTER VIII

“He must also say whether these moral reagents...” — G. Giardino 2.

“But was it therefore true...” — V. Lentini.

“They treat us, the men of the Second Army...” — A. Gorlini.

“Women shout after us...” — M. Muccini.

“Of actual treason...” — G. M. Trevelyan.

“The Plezzo position...”, “in the Volzana trenches...” and “who, then, would feel able...” — E. Barone.

“At the first gunshots...” — I. Flores.

All quotations on these pages, except those expressly attributed to another source, are taken from O. Malagodi.

“The information made me doubt...” — F. Rocca.

“Had my orders...” — L. Cadorna 3.

“From the telegram... Your Excellency informs me...” — L. Cadorna 3.

“I do not conceal that it gave me the impression...” — M. Soleri.

“I was recalled the other day...” — O. Malagodi.

“Through force of circumstances...” — V. Varanini 2.

“During the battle...” and “He was subsequently transferred...” — U. Caimpenta.

A COMMENT BY THE AUTHOR

“[We have deceived ourselves too greatly] into believing...” — G. Fortunato.

“Concerning what happened in Italy...” — C. d. S., 11 July 1919.

“On the Eastern Front and the Karst...” — J. Chastenet.

“[The Franco-British armies] alone...” and “Losses in dead...” — P. Renouvin.

“Those losses made so great an impression...” — M. Caracciolo 1.

“In France, after the unsuccessful offensive...” — V. Varanini 3.

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The attached bibliography lists most of the books which the author consulted with some benefit. It makes no claim to completeness and is, indeed, very incomplete as regards foreign works.

The list is arranged alphabetically, with the initial taking precedence where surnames are identical. When an author has more than one work, the entries are identified by the author's surname and initial followed by an ordinal number. The same reference is used to identify the sources of quotations.

Where the bibliographical description appears insufficient and the circumstances warrant it, the abbreviation MRM indicates that the volume or pamphlet may be found at the Museo del Risorgimento in Milan. The abbreviation s. d. indicates that no year of publication is printed in the volume.

Almost as primary sources, special mention should be made of B. Vigezzi's commentary introducing and presenting O. Malagodi's Conversazioni della guerra, and A. Monticone's commentary on A. Gatti's Caporetto. The author also wishes to record that he had the opportunity to read the first part, ending at the beginning of the Battle of Caporetto, of General Cavaciocchi's unpublished book.

As regards periodicals - daily, weekly and monthly - those consulted regularly were Corriere della Sera (C. d. S.), La Stampa, Avanti! and Domenica del Corriere (D. d. C.). They are first-rate sources for penetrating the spirit of the period. Il Popolo d'Italia, La Tribuna, Il Secolo and L'Idea nazionale were consulted occasionally, together with several issues of post-war magazines such as Rassegna del combattente, La Nuova Antologia and a few others.

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NOTES

1. See the original titles in the bibliographical appendix.
2. Although Lord Kitchener held political office as Minister of War, his army background made him far more the spokesman for military power within the Government than the spokesman for political power within the General Staff.
3. The Napoli Brigade had lost 3,000 men, including 96 officers, during the preceding June and July; it lost another 1,800 men between September and November and was therefore completely exhausted.
4. On 10 June 1917 the Sassari Brigade had one thousand men put out of action by Italian artillery.
5. It is therefore untrue that Giolitti first met Cadorna in 1913.
6. Our offensive actually began on 12 May.
7. Probably the King.
8. In reality, Point 652.
9. In reality, Point 652.
10. Thus in a direction almost opposite to that indicated by Barzini.
11. Salsa took part in the assault on the morning of the 24th at 5:30.
12. The Duma was the verbose Russian parliament.
13. This estimate greatly exceeded Germany's actual capabilities.
14. It published the report in the issue of 2 August 1919.
15. Regimental Arditi had existed earlier, but on 29 July 1917 the first Army assault unit was formed.
16. Written with an 'i' in the original.
17. The time at which the artillery fire began.
18. It is right to remember that this advice from Capello echoes a Supreme Command circular dated 17 October 1916.
19. Manzoni, I promessi sposi, Chapter IV.
20. He was on fatigue duty.
21. Point 126 on the Vipacco, not Point 126 at Grazigna.
22. He was promoted Lieutenant Colonel shortly afterwards.
23. The official history of the Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo, published by the Ministry of Defence in 1953, is entirely silent about the participation of the Arditi in the battle of 4 September.
24. In Austrian terminology of the period, 'group' meant army corps.
25. There were approximately 20,000 guns on the Western Front.
26. The French Army Intelligence Service.
27. Roberta Wohlstetter, Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1962.
28. These words are taken from the report of the Commission of Inquiry into Caporetto.
29. 'The lion roars again'; the first occurrence referred to the raid upon Pola.
30. And issued on the following day.
31. The future Marshal and Chief of the General Staff during the Second World War.
32. Romboncino was a secondary summit approximately one kilometre north-west of the summit of Rombon.
33. On 14 October 1806 Napoleon defeated the Prussian army at Jena and subsequently forced it into an ignominious surrender.
34. Frescura is mistaken here: it was Cadorna's bulletin of 24 October, not that of the 23rd, which contained the phrase 'the enemy blow finds us firm and well prepared'.
35. He was Lieutenant Colonel Trezzani, the future Chief of the General Staff.
36. Published in the daily newspaper Il Giorno on 17 December 1961.
37. General Villani.
38. The report was premature; Cividale did not fall until 27 October.
39. General Caviglia writes of himself in the third person.

40. The time stated in the order and the time given by Soffici do not agree.

41. Erroneously printed as XXVI in the text.

42. At the end of 1964 the Minister of Defence promised that the official history of Caporetto would be published within two years.